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# The Portrait of a Psyche: Women's Underworld Journeys in Four Modern American Novels.

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THE PORTRAIT OF A PSYCHE:  
WOMEN'S UNDERWORLD JOURNEYS  
IN FOUR MODERN AMERICAN NOVELS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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## **Preface**

Inspired by James Hillman's proposal of the Psyche myth as a revisionary paradigm for twentieth-century analytical psychology, this study began as a tracing of Psyche's path through four modern American novels: Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady, Caroline Gordon's The Women on the Porch, William Faulkner's Light in August, and Toni Morrison's Beloved. As the parallels and distinctions between the Greek myth and the American novels emerged, the significant segment of Psyche's elaborate plot came to be seen in the underworld descent enacted by Isabel Archer, Catherine Chapman and Sethe, evaded by Lena Grove. Another image, absent from the myth, persisted in the novels: the portrait of a lady, with the exception, again, of Lena Grove.

Despite the resistance to the underworld, which is associated with suffering, sin, darkness, dirt and death, Psyche's descent is necessary for the progression from separation to wholeness. Lena is exempt from the underworld descent because, even while she evokes Psyche's longing for wholeness, she already embodies that wholeness from the beginning of the novel to the end. Yet that ultimate wholeness remains a distant goal toward which the other American protagonists proceed from amidst their modern world of divisions and fragmentation.

The portrait of a lady frames the resistance to the underworld in terms of an attractive yet rather thin idea of the lady. It also sharpens the novelists' underworldly focus upon emergence in beauty, a task more immediate than ascending in wholeness. Portrait-like, Psyche's physical beauty attracts the attention of mankind, yet it must be deepened through the underworld descent. Psyche emerges from the underworld with a box of beauty, yet for the American women, this deeper beauty is portrayed in terms of gesture and movement that can be more rendered more aptly in a novel than in a picture. While Lena Grove belies the static frame of the portrait by defining herself in the fullness and compelling momentum of a "lady travelling," the other women elaborate the ordeal through which they emerge in beauty.

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## **Abstract**

Drawing from James Hillman's psychological reading of myth, this study traces the emergence of the ancient myth of Psyche in Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady, Caroline Gordon's The Women on the Porch, William Faulkner's Light in August, and Toni Morrison's Beloved. From the perspective of modern divisions, the novelists look forward to the wholeness of Psyche's reunion with Eros and the assumption of the mortal woman, yet their immediate focus is the transformative journey through the underworld.

James elaborates the mythical impact of money; like the coins Psyche pays Charon, who detaches her from a sense of her own perfection as he ferries her into the underworld, Isabel Archer's fortune occasions the descent of the American innocent. James and particularly Gordon, who broadens the impact of the myth to include the modern intellectual, demonstrate that through the underworld journey, girlish goodness and portrait-like beauty deepen into the beautiful gestures of Isabel's return to Rome and Catherine Chapman's rescue of her husband.

Reconfiguring Psyche's myth, Faulkner and Morrison elaborate resistance to passage to and from the underworld in terms of payments that deny the holistic logic of the psyche. Faulkner divides Psyche's journey between Lena Grove, whose evasion of the underworld seems a gift, and Joe Christmas, who attempts to purchase immunity from mortality

and the inevitable descent. Though Gail Hightower believes his own suffering has paid for exemption from emergence, Lena's Psyche urge draws him out of the underworld.

Morrison inverts Charon's crucial role through Stamp Paid; though he heroically ferries passengers from enslavement to freedom, he assures them that their suffering has bought freedom from the underworld. Yet this purchased evasion is belied by Sethe, who kills her daughter to protect her from the sullyng passage, and Beloved, who erupts from the underworld to exact endless payment from Sethe. Thus emerges Psyche's challenge to distinguish between guiding love and compassion for underworldly figures who would ensnare her forever. As Sethe's emergence is finally secured by Eros-like Paul D, Morrison's work suggests the urgency of the underworldly descent and emergence for the American literary imagination.



## **Introduction**

Ancient myths reveal that poets embraced an understanding of human nature that allows one to discuss patterns of human action in a holistic manner. What has been called the mythical mode of thinking is here recalled in contrast to the philosophical inheritance of the twentieth century: emphatically rational, modern thought claims to doubt any reality that cannot be proved logically or empirically. If the modern mind can be said to adhere to an overriding myth, moreover, it would be the belief in the progress of humankind, especially through subjecting its beliefs relentlessly to analysis through those very criteria of logic and empiricism. Yet it is precisely the irrational, the illogical, and the timelessly non-progressive realities of humanity so abhorrent to modern thought that novelists of the twentieth century have been impelled to explore.

The mythical mode of thought that composed an accepted way of thinking for the ancients becomes a practiced mode of imagining for the modern novelist. Novelist Milan Kundera suggests that the purpose of the novel is to resist the "forgetting of being" effected by the narrowly conceived technical concerns of the modern era. Moderns have grown uncomfortable with myth and the soul has been forgotten, yet the work of novelists reveals not only a kinship with ancient myths but a quest for rediscovery of the soul or psyche as the center of human being. Modernist writers

infused their works with myth in hopes of rendering anew that ancient, holistic understanding of human nature in an age when history and society came to seem increasingly incomprehensible. They recalled the myth of Psyche in particular to recall the ancient understanding of the psyche or soul.

The ancient poets understood the soul or psyche in its intimacy with the body; classicist Ruth Padel explains:

As ghost or immortal soul, psuche is detachable from the physical self . . . it can be breathlike or fluid, ebb from the body, fly or flutter overhead. Psuche escapes through wounds, continues an independent external existence outside the body, but keeps enough of its relationship with a particular self to resemble that self's body in Hades. If any inner human part is immortal, it is the psuche. Yet even this is shadowily somatic. (31-32)

Though it outlives the body, the psyche is recognizable in the underworld by its bodily image. Despite its separability from the body, the psyche is formed by what the mortal body suffers. Moreover, ancient myth makers imagined that the psyche was located in the deepest recesses of the body, where it shared "profoundly in the learning, feeling, thinking, and dividing attributed to innards" (27). It suggests the human capacity for speculation, for thinking curiously about something, supposing, wondering. Because of its imagined location, the psyche seems to be associated with what is now called "gut instinct," or even "feminine intuition."

Counter to the mythical understanding, moderns conceive of the soul and body as separate entities; the soul seems ephemeral, purely spiritual, at odds with the body. The modern novelists in this study delineate that fragmentation, yet by incorporating the myth of Psyche into their novels, they project the action towards wholeness. Whereas modern thought loses sight of the whole, in its attempt to understand humankind by examining its separate parts, the myth of Psyche maps an approach toward a holistic understanding of humanity. The Psyche myth is particularly suited to that task, portraying the intimate relation between the soul and body as it traces the path from separation to reunion.

The first novelist to make the Psyche myth a central aspect of his novel was the Roman Lucius Apuleius, whose second-century version of the Greek myth is the oldest known. Apuleius's novel, The Golden Ass or The Metamorphoses, traces the journey of the errant young Lucius who, in punishment for his curiosity, is transformed into an ass. After numerous adventures, the goddess to whom Lucius finally devotes himself restores his human form.

At the midpoint of the novel, the myth of Psyche forms the story within a story, told to comfort a young bride who suffers the misfortune of separation from her groom. As Psyche's own myth is a tale of separation and reunion, the purpose of the telling as well as its theme is healing and

wholeness. Moreover, the myth's central position in the Roman novel suggests that the Psyche myth itself is integral to all novels that retell the age-old allegory of the soul's journey through life.

The Psyche myth, as an ancient image of the *logos* of the psyche, attracts the attention of contemporary psychologists who look to the myth as an instance of psychological development.<sup>1</sup> For Freudians, the myth depicts a fantasy or dream of a young girl becoming a woman; her sexual anxieties are reflected in the motif of marriage to a monster. For Jungians, Psyche represents the *anima*; her journey portrays the development of women or the development of feminine aspects in men, illustrating the impact of archetypes on human development or "self-realization" (Gollnick 148).<sup>2</sup>

Yet most psychological interpretations of the Psyche myth neglect its context in Apuleius's novel, James Gollnick maintains; removed from its literary context, the myth seems merely to serve selected purposes of psychology. Gollnick insists that the context of Psyche's myth is imperative to understanding the literary and religious significance of the

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<sup>1</sup>James Gollnick catalogues twentieth-century psychological interpretations of the Psyche myth in his book Love and the Soul (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Jungian readings include the archetypal understanding that the individual participates in a collective heritage of timeless aspects of humanity significant in psychological and spiritual life.

myth. Freudian emphasis upon the body, when understood in the context of the novel, yields an important emphasis on Psyche's body throughout her spiritual journey (148).

Spiritual experience must be deeply grounded in the body, a point which reflects the mythical Greek understanding of the soul.

Jungian readings of Psyche's tasks as mere stages of development become the more profound initiation and transformation of the soul when read in context (Gollnick 149). Indeed, the very title of Apuleius's novel, Metamorphoses, emphasizes its concern with dramatic transformation. Thus, Gollnick's study exposes the shortcomings of merely psychological readings of the myth. What is significant in Psyche's journey is not simply the growth to maturity, or the realization of self, but the transformation, the literal change in essence or form. Indeed, the profound impact of transformation is dramatized throughout Apuleius' novel: Lucius does not merely become mature, he suffers a metamorphosis from man to beast, and back again to man.

The most profound reading of the contemporary significance of the Psyche myth is given by James Hillman (who draws from both Freud and Jung). His approach, depth psychology, attempts a *logos* of the psyche as a whole. In order to bypass the limitations of considering the psyche as an individual in isolation, his approach includes an

understanding of the archetypal, one that "takes into account the depths of the soul at its most subjective, transcendent, and impersonal level and assumes that personal behavior is derived from something beyond the personal" (Myth 13). Moreover, depth psychology "allows the speculative function of the soul to operate as one of the psyche's necessities" (Dream 12). It acknowledges the soul's capacity for curiosity and wonder, which is unaccounted for by psychoanalysis.

Hillman articulates the significance of the Psyche myth for the field of psychology in The Myth of Analysis (1972), wherein he lauds the discovery of the unconscious that leads to rediscovery of the soul and the awakening of the imagination, yet laments that psychoanalysis does not embrace the whole psyche. Moreover, Hillman argues that analysis, as a taking apart in order to examine closely, suggests dissection and fragmentation; it suggests a way of thinking that assumes that only the analyst has any power of understanding. The analyst proceeds as though he is free to disassemble and reassemble the complex or belief in question using only elements that have passed the test of rational transparency. Aristotelian in its roots, this method was seized upon by Descartes and then by the Enlightenment, developed in the nineteenth century, and rendered commonplace in the twentieth century when theories of psychoanalysis are integral to our self-conception. The

"myth" of analysis, then, is that its method is sufficient to reorganize human irrationality and set it on the road of progress. The falsehood of this myth is that it does not heal but tears apart the psyche: it separates the soul from what appears to be its illness, impairing the apprehension of the psyche's wholeness.

In contrast to analytic attempts to master the subject, depth psychology acknowledges the limitation of knowing about the psyche, for as the Greek Heraclitus wrote: "You could not find the ends of the soul though you travelled every way, so deep is its logos." Depth is the dimension of the psyche: the psyche is approached by gestures that "move inward" and "get deeper."

Furthermore, Hillman's study suggests that the effects of analytical thought are particularly visited upon the conception of women. He argues that the "mytheme of female inferiority" is "basic to the structure of the analytical mind":

Misogyny would seem inseparable from analysis, which in turn is but a late manifestation of the Western, Protestant, scientific, Apollonian ego. This structure of consciousness has never known what to do with the dark, material and passionate part of itself, except to cast it off and call it Eve. (8)

To deny human aspects characterized as dark and feminine is not only to separate masculine from feminine, but to associate what is "dark, material and passionate" with what is female. Diseases of the psyche, according to analytical

thought, are characterized by association with darkness. The dark, female, physical and inexplicable are thus severed from the light, male, spiritual and rational.

To correct the "myth" of analysis, Hillman boldly proposes the Psyche myth as a framework by which to reconfigure the study of the psyche. The myth is a paradigm for representing the psyche as a whole, a manner of "soulmaking" that brings all aspects of life to the soul, including the "dark" and "feminine" and corporeal that are habitually dissociated from the psyche. The goal of Psyche's arduous journey is precisely the unification of these opposites. Particularly, Psyche's descent to the underworld is a way of reclaiming those darknesses for the psyche.

Despite its recurring appearance in works of various ages from Greek and Roman to modern American, reappearances that suggest the timeless quality of the myth, the Psyche myth itself traces a certain progression. Whereas previous psychoanalytical myths, Freud's Oedipus and Jung's senex king, suggest cyclical patterns, caught in incest or the repetition of overthrow, the Psyche myth is a tale of healing, portraying Psyche's advance from division to wholeness. While the practice of psychoanalysis delves into the depths of the psyche, bringing it to the underworld, its analytic rationalism cannot bring the psyche to emergence. The Psyche myth uniquely encompasses this descent and, significantly, portrays the soul's emergence as a deepening



that requires subjection to the irrational and the persistence of love. The myth of Psyche needs to be studied carefully and entered into imaginatively in order to learn its wisdom about the descent and emergence of the soul. While analysis tends to lose sight of the whole, the myth of Psyche approaches the multiple and multivalent aspects of the psyche as portions of an urgent journey--propelled by Psyche's overarching love for Eros--toward wholeness.

The myth of Psyche, Hillman maintains, is a way of understanding our time "when the need of the soul is for love and the need of eros is for psyche. Today we suffer and are ill from their separation." Psyche's physical separation from her divine husband, Eros, is paradigmatic of multivalent divisions. The division of soul from body extends through male and female, spirit and matter, rational and imaginal. Psyche's underworld descent, impelled by her overarching longing for reunion with Eros, also suggests the means toward unification of all these divisions.<sup>3</sup> For moderns, Psyche's descent dramatizes the encounter of the psyche with characteristics that have been disassociated from it.

Like Apuleius's novel, modern novels provide a context in which psychological insights into the Psyche myth are extended and deepened. Like Gollnick, the novelists are not

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<sup>3</sup>Hillman's subsequent book, The Dream and the Underworld (1979), extends his study of the underworld.

only interested in individual development. They suggest a broader impact of Psyche's transformation upon the American literary imagination. Like Hillman, the novelists focus upon the crucial significance of the underworld descent. For American protagonists, the descent enacts a longing for the darkness that must be encountered in order to emerge with beauty, with a balance of body and soul that allows them to bring beauty into the world.

A summary of the Psyche myth as told by Apuleius will help this discussion proceed in greater detail. Psyche is a princess of extraordinary beauty, so beautiful that men honor the mortal girl as an incarnation of Aphrodite, meanwhile neglecting worship of the now irate goddess of love. Incited by jealousy, Aphrodite instructs her son Eros, the god of love, to punish Psyche. She gives Eros a lingering kiss and sends him on his errand. Meanwhile, the Delphic oracle proclaims that Psyche must be exposed on a rock so that the monster fated to be her husband may make his claim. While the maiden bravely prepares for her marriage to death, Eros falls in love with her in spite of Aphrodite's order. When Psyche is brought to the rock, Eros sends winds to carry her to his palace in the heavens. Hidden by darkness, Eros comes upon her and makes her his wife. Always gone by daybreak, he warns her not to try to see him.

Psyche's sisters visit her, grow jealous of her riches, and plot revenge. They convince Psyche that her unseen husband is a deadly snake. She conceals a knife and lamp by her bed, so that when Eros falls asleep she can cut off his head. Upon lighting the lamp, however, she discovers that her husband is the beautiful, winged Eros. Pricking herself upon his arrows, her desire for him deepens, yet as she falls to kissing him, oil from the lamp drips upon his shoulder. The pain awakens him, and he flies away to punish Psyche for her betrayal.

Longing for her lost love, the pregnant Psyche wanders the world in search of him. Meanwhile Eros lies in his mother's house, aching from his burn and from his love for Psyche. When Psyche finally reaches the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess orders her scourged by Trouble and Sorrow. Mocking the half-mortal, half-divine nature of Psyche's unborn child, the goddess beats her further and burdens her with a number of tasks that culminate in the descent to the underworld. Aphrodite orders Psyche to obtain a box of beauty from Persephone.

Suffering enslavement and often daunted by her seemingly impossible tasks, Psyche contemplates suicide, yet she is aided and advised by various gods and aspects of nature. A far-seeing tower gives Psyche crucial advice for her underworld journey: she must carry two coins in her mouth to pay Charon, the ferryman, for her passage into the

underworld. She must also carry barley cakes in each hand to placate Persephone's dog, Cerberus. She may not luxuriate in the richness of Persephone's palace, rather, she must sit on the floor and eat only a crust of brown bread. Furthermore, Psyche must resist the impulse of pity when she encounters the weaving women or the floating corpse who beg for her assistance: they are traps set by Aphrodite to keep Psyche forever in the underworld.

Psyche obeys the instructions and retrieves the box of beauty, yet on the threshold of the underworld, she opens the box and puts the beauty on her face, hoping to attract Eros; the box releases a Stygian sleep, and Psyche falls into a deep slumber. When Eros's burn has healed, he departs from his mother's house to find Psyche. Discovering her on the verge of the underworld, he carefully washes her of the sleep, enabling her to bring the box of beauty to Aphrodite. The couple finally ascends to Mount Olympus, where Psyche drinks ambrosia and becomes immortal. The wedding of Psyche and Eros, now sanctioned by Jove, is celebrated by all the gods and goddesses, including Aphrodite. Psyche gives birth to a daughter, named Joy.

Psyche's journey, as she forges a path from separation to unity, reveals multivalent implications. As Psyche is loved and tortured by the god and goddess of love, respectively, she completes the journey to found a new order of love. Impelled by love, Psyche becomes the newest

resident of Mount Olympus, the only mortal woman made divine. The elevation of a mortal woman was novel even for the Greeks. Her singularity is recognized by the Romantic poet Keats, who addresses her in his "Ode to Psyche": "O latest born and loveliest vision far / Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!"

A parallel to Psyche's new position is offered by modern theology: a paradigm of the unity of body and soul noted by Hillman and before him, Carl Jung. The 1950 Papal Encyclical delineates the Catholic belief in the Assumption of the Virgin Mary who is assumed body and soul into heaven. Not only her immortal soul but her mortal body achieves the position of divinity. (As an embodiment of the paradox of virgin and mother, another article of Catholic faith, she bears the contradictory associations of purity and mother earth as she is elevated.)

According to Jung, the dogma raised and answered the question, "What has become of the characteristic relation of the mother-image to the earth, darkness, the abysmal side of bodily man with his animal passions and instinctual nature, and to 'matter' in general?" The dogma "elevated the Christian version of the feminine principle to a radically new position" (qtd. in Myth 215). This image presents to twentieth century consciousness the elevation of a woman, and with her, matter and earth, to a higher level, while the spiritual level is brought down to earth. Thus, the

Assumption of Mary is a modern image of the ultimate wholeness toward which Psyche advances.

The ultimate unity of Psyche's ascent, as well as Mary's Assumption, remains an important yet still-distant goal for protagonists of modern American novels in this study. As novelists retell the myth of Psyche, the myth helps to convey their vision of ultimate wholeness. Yet they do not portray the facile accomplishment of that unity. As the novelists portray women emerging into the public eye amidst an atmosphere of division, they focus their versions of the myth upon Psyche's underworld descent: her initiation into the underworld, her arduous journey through it, and the challenge of emergence.

Though the underworld descent is imperative to the development of psyche, the myth emphasizes that it must not become an escape from the world. Once Psyche has reached Persephone's palace, where the depths of the underworld reveal its richness, she is tempted to luxuriate there. Yet Psyche's longing for Eros propels her emergence and distinguishes her from Persephone, who was abducted by Hades into the underworld. Though the *telos* of Psyche's journey is reunion with Eros, her more immediate purpose is to emerge with beauty.

Psyche's physical beauty occasions the shift of mankind's attention from the goddess to a mortal woman; this shift announces that a new contribution to beauty will be

made in terms of mortality. The goddess Aphrodite herself knows the value of a kind of beauty that incorporates knowledge of death; even she can obtain it only from the underworld.

Psyche's growth in beauty is distinct from Plato's model of the soul's ascent, Hillman points out. According to Plato, the soul contemplates beauty as the highest good, gradually relinquishing the body while making a ladder-like ascent. In contrast, Psyche's journey emphasizes the body, both her own and that of the child she carries, which suggests the ultimate fruitfulness of the descent. In order to make her eventual ascent to Olympus, she first descends to the underworld, where she retrieves beauty of a kind that includes the body yet outlasts death. In American novelists' versions of the myth, this deeper beauty is illustrated through the action of the protagonists who are emerging into the world and taking on new responsibility.

The transformation of Psyche's physical beauty into beauty of soul through the underworld descent begins, paradoxically, with the image of money. Charon initiates Psyche into the underworld when he takes the coin from Psyche's mouth. As Harriet Eisman points out, "Charon's filthy fingers in [Psyche's] mouth relieve her of any attachment she might have to the perfection of her earthly beauty" (39). By the time Psyche begins her descent, she has suffered abandonment by her family, the jealousy of her

sisters, separation from Eros, and the mockery and torture of Aphrodite, but Psyche has yet to see evil as a part of her self, to know her own participation in it. From the start of her journey, Psyche's physical descent also suggests an interior journey; through Charon, Psyche quite literally ingests the dirt of the underworld.

Like Psyche's beauty, her virtue develops beyond the girlish goodness of mere obedience to Eros, Aphrodite, or the tower. Hillman maintains that the money that gains Psyche entrance into the underworld "possibilizes" her imagination. As Psyche must resist being ensnared by her compassion, her imagination must come into play to discover a kind of action beyond what might be expected of her. She must be able to make the often subtle distinction between appeals to her compassion and her overarching love for Eros. Among the novels, the extreme difficulty of loving action is epitomized in Sethe's killing of her daughter to protect her from slavery.

For Henry James, Psyche's descent to the underworld is configured as the American girl's return to the Old World of Europe. For Caroline Gordon, the descent occurs on American soil, in the South, within the context of family ancestry. While James's protagonist returns to the underworld, Gordon dramatizes the action necessary for emergence. The American psyche's encounter with the underworld suggests a re-



visitation to the past as well as a confrontation with the underworld within.

William Faulkner also portrays the underworldly encounter in the American South, in terms that include within the darkness of the underworld the abstracted idea of race. Toni Morrison explores race in concrete particular, portraying one woman's emergence from enslavement. Her novel engages the American literary imagination in the descent into its own history of enslavement.

The collective work of these four novelists suggests that American consciousness as a whole undertakes the descent into darkness. The myth of Psyche demonstrates the need for the Greek and Roman psyche to encounter its darkness. American novelists' versions of the myth suggest that the American psyche does not simply require the encounter with darkness, but longs for it.

Since James, the American psyche's emergence in beauty is framed in terms of the portrait of a lady. The lady had come to suggest an ideal that is disassociated from darkness, matter, and the body. James's example of this ideal is a woman who learns of the vulgarity of the world in order to maintain her distance above it. Yet he uses the momentum of the Psyche myth in order to illustrate the woman's impulse to engage that aspect of the world in the attempt to transform it.

Portraits suggest the ability to capture the soul. Traditional peoples have been known to abhor and avoid photographic portraits for this reason. Novelists' attempts to create portraits of a lady imply that novels are more adequate to the subject of a woman than paintings; they delve deeper than the portrait, exploring the dramatic action of the soul's journey; novels move inward, approaching the interior of the subject. Moving inward and downward, novelists move in the direction in which depth psychology approaches the psyche. Thus, novels are capable of portraying the psyche more closely than a portrait, whose depiction of depth and interiority can only be suggested. The overarching action of the novels moves the subjects beyond the stasis of portraiture, a stasis which seems detrimental to the journey of psyche. Moreover, the Psyche myth enables the novelists to launch their protagonists on a course of action that illustrates a beauty of more depth than a portrait is capable of.

Whereas psychoanalysis perpetuates a way of thinking that severs the psyche from human aspects associated with darkness, the American novelists retell Psyche's myth, elaborating the descent to the underworld in particular, to portray a means of rediscovering the "shadowily somatic" aspect of the psyche. Moreover, they suggest that the concept of woman, as well as soul, must not exclude but

include the encounter with the underworld, with the darkness that has been theoretically severed from psyche and woman.

Thus, mythology gives access to aspects of human nature that run deep in the core of human experience, yet remain hidden by the present culture. Hillman maintains that "mythology is a psychology of antiquity. Psychology is a mythology of modernity" (22). He explains: "The ancients had no psychology, properly speaking, but they had myths, the speculative tellings about humans in relation with more-than-human forces and images. We moderns have no mythology, properly speaking, but we have psychological systems, the speculative theories about humans in relation with more-than-human forces and images, today called fields, instincts, drives, complexes" (Dream 24). Though the work of both psychologists and novelists illustrates the contemporary significance of ancient mythology, objections to the use of myth to draw conclusions about literature persist, ranging from the contention that its applications are too broadly applied, to the argument that it narrowly constricts the possibilities of interpretation.

One objection to the use of myth contends that as anything can happen in a myth, it can be interpreted to have any kind of meaning; comparisons with myth may be used to justify any claim about a character. Claude Levi-Strauss addresses this concern, clarifying an approach that looks for what emerges in recurring patterns. He points out that

"what gives myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless" (209). As comparative myth critics look for meaning in recurring patterns, however, deviations from that pattern may be mistaken for instances of repression that prevent normal functioning. Yet Levi-Strauss maintains that "every version belongs to the myth," that each different version of a myth contributes to the overall meaning of the myth (218). The substance of the myth lies "in the story which it tells," what it reveals about human nature each time it is told, what elements of the myth recur in each telling, retelling, version and revision of the myth (209). After a career of working with ancient myth in modern fiction, Gordon marvels in her last work: "It is strange how, in this life, patterns of human conduct repeat themselves, like a recurrent *motif* in music, or a figure in a tapestry" (qtd. in Makowsky 48). Gordon finds that repetition is revelatory, not constrictive; patterns reveal an overall movement or design from which one may draw conclusions about humanity.

Further objection to myth criticism argues that it imposes an interpretation upon works or characters, that archetypal patterns amount to reductive stereotypes. Yet novelists themselves begin with unexamined assumptions, and approach them imaginatively, to see what they reveal. Morrison is attracted to repetitions of human action that have become commonplace: "I like to work with, to fret, the

cliche, which is a cliche because the experience expressed in it is important" ("The Language Must Not Sweat" 122).

Moreover, James discusses the literary form of the novel, its creative capacity to encompass the time-worn and the novel, "its power not only, while preserving that form with closeness, to range through all the differences of the individual relation to its general subject-matter, all the varieties of outlook on life . . . but positively to appear more true to its character in proportion as it strains, or tends to burst, with a latent extravagance, its mould" (Preface 7). Retold through the ever-altering form of the novel, myth is valued by novelists for its richness, fostered by the atmosphere of what might be made new, in the hopes that it takes on a life of its own that bursts beyond the expectations even of the novelist. Each novelist in this study revises the Psyche myth in his or her perspective, as if to test its capacity for wholeness against the particular disunities of the twentieth century.

Furthermore, mythical allusions help to reveal qualities of the past that might be obscured by the present culture. Faulkner explains that the title Light in August refers to "that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours," a light that appears in rare moments in Mississippi yet evokes a certain quality characteristic of Ancient Greece. Myth assists in recovering something from the past. The fiction of novelists, particularly Faulkner

and Morrison, is pervaded by a longing for something that is lost. Myths are part of a forgotten way of seeing the world: the world at home with mythical realities, "the deeper instincts and living signs," as Barbara Rigney calls them, that have been subverted (11). Myth is a way for novelists to recall to the reader what has been forgotten.

In form, the modern novel proceeds from the *bildungsroman* and the bourgeois novel. The former, born in the late half of the eighteenth century, is a novel of development or education, presenting the hero in the process of becoming, tracing a man's growth from youth to maturity. Unlike the static heroes of previous novel types, the main character of the *bildungsroman* changes and develops. The modern novel also traces the emergence of the main character, who is often female; rather than the development of consciousness, the modern novel develops the unconscious, the realm of the psyche, which is the new territory for the American novel. Perhaps it is no coincidence that women emerge as subjects alongside the unconscious, or that the psyche is personified as a woman. Though the perception of women in particular seems to suffer the effect of analysis, the child Psyche carries emphasizes the bringing to birth of something that remains partially hidden, as she is visibly pregnant with an invisible life, carried through the descent to the underworld.

**Chapter I. Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady:  
Girlish Goodness and the Depth of Money**

Isabel Archer, the young subject of The Portrait of a Lady, is an American girl of innocence, imagination and numerous ideals. Her sojourn in England and her unexpected inheritance of a fortune, however, promise to change her life dramatically. Henrietta Stackpole, discovering the news, warns her friend of the insulating effect the money will have upon her already sheltered character:

The peril for you is that you live too much in the world of your own dreams--you are not enough in contact with reality--with the toiling, striving, suffering, I may even say sinning, world that surrounds you. You are too fastidious; you have too many graceful illusions. Your newly acquired thousands will shut you up more and more to the society of a few selfish and heartless people, who will be interested in keeping up those illusions. . . . Whatever life you lead, you must put your soul into it . . . and from the moment you do that it ceases to be romance, I assure you: it becomes grim reality! (188)

Henrietta accurately identifies Isabel's problem, her disconnection from "the toiling, striving, suffering . . . sinning world," her "graceful illusions" of the goodness of the world and her role in it. She also knows that Isabel must put her soul into her life's work. Isabel's girlish ideal of goodness must test itself against "grim reality"; she must encounter the depths of her own soul, listen to it, and come to know its desires.

One of Isabel's greatest ideals is her own goodness, which she seems to equate with the absence of error; it is

her ambition to avoid making mistakes. Yet one of the great ironies of the novel is that "the single, sacred act" of Isabel's life is the same act that unites her intimately, irrevocably, to a master of subtle vice. Aiming to rid Isabel of her numerous ideas, Gilbert Osmond marries her for her money.

Despite the accuracy of Henrietta's character evaluation and the wisdom of her advice, she is mistaken in her belief that money will immerse Isabel further in her own illusions. Rather than shelter her from the world, money plunges Isabel into the experience of suffering. Isabel's story is that of a psyche longing for goodness, yet becoming intimately involved in the "toiling, striving, suffering . . . sinning world," and discovering this only once she is irrevocably immersed in it. Thus, Isabel's plot depicts a gradual awakening to the reality that she is in the midst of an error she had scrupulously tried to avoid.

The topic of money has drawn considerable attention from James scholars, yet a mythical reading reveals the deeper implications of this image. In the Psyche myth, money is exchanged for passage into the underworld, enacting an encounter with the sordid effects of that realm. To prepare for her descent, Psyche is instructed to carry coins in her mouth to pay Charon to ferry her into the realm of the dead. Taking a coin from Psyche's mouth, Charon's dirty fingers initiate her into the depth and filth of that realm.



Isabel also pays her way into that realm, drawn by her desire to grant Osmond her fortune. The transfer of her money marks her entrance into the underworld: after their marriage, they reside in Rome at the darkly named Palazzo Roccanera, where Osmond acquaints Isabel with the vulgarity of the world, challenging her idea of goodness.

Both myth and novel depict the result of suffering as the awakening of a young woman's soul. The Psyche myth illuminates Isabel's descent, the mythical effect of money, and her movement toward emergence from Osmond's underworld impelled by her longing for the comfort of Ralph Touchett. Yet by the end of the novel, Isabel distinguishes herself from her mythical counterpart: whereas Psyche is rescued from the underworld by Eros, and ascends to Mt. Olympus, Isabel rejects Caspar Goodwood's erotic attempt to "save" her, enacting a return to the underworld as she returns to Rome.

Isabel's return indicates that her girlish goodness, her revulsion of the grossness of the world, has been transformed into the quality of a lady able to encompass that depth in her gesture of generosity. In her development of soul, she does not escape from the cares of the world but lives to engage and transform them.

### **The Underworldly Gift**

James Hillman's psychological reading of the underworld and his commentary on the mythical image of money helps to

illuminate Isabel Archer's descent. The underworld is commonly known as the realm of the dead, indicated by shadows and inhabited by shades. Hillman explores it as the realm of the psyche and the imagination; this insight suggests a compelling reading of her cousin Ralph Touchett's gift to Isabel. Ralph's arrangement for Isabel to inherit a fortune is motivated by the desire to gratify her imagination; Isabel's entrance into the underworld is the unforeseen consequence of that gift.

Isabel's inheritance of the fortune is arranged by the fatally ill Ralph Touchett and his dying father, attended by underworldly imagery that foreshadows her descent. While Ralph sits at the bedside of his father, discussing his plan for Isabel, "Ralph's tall shadow [is] projected over wall and ceiling, with an outline constantly varying but always grotesque" (156). The outlandish shadow casts a foreboding tone over the discussion, exaggerating Ralph's height and physical ugliness as if to forewarn of the monstrous result of his good intentions. The disastrous effect of the gift promises to overshadow his generosity.

As father and son discuss Isabel's fortune, they mention Daniel Touchett's disparate marriage, foreshadowing Isabel's own unhappy match. Though Ralph expresses his particular interest in Isabel, he voices his general refusal to marry. He convinces his father to divide Ralph's own inheritance, leaving the other half to Isabel (whereas

marriage would imply giving his whole fortune and his whole self). He explains his reason:

I should like to put a little *wind in her sails*. . .  
 . . I should like to put it in her power to do some  
 of the things she wants. She wants to see the  
 world, for instance. I should like to *put money in  
 her purse*. . . . I should like to make her rich. .  
 . . *I call people rich when they are able to  
 gratify their imagination*. Isabel has a great deal  
 of imagination. (160) (Emphasis added)

The gift of money gratifies Ralph's imagination, James writes (163), yet more significantly, money enables Isabel to gratify--or in Hillman's term "possibilize"--her own imagination. Whereas Ralph intends for Isabel to "see the world," his gift will take her further: into the underworld.

Hillman describes the mythological and psychological significance of money and its remarkable connection to the imagination and the underworld in a way that resonates with Ralph's words:

Money [appears] in specific denominations, that is, precise quanta or configurations of value, i.e., images. Let us define money as that which *possibilizes the imagination*. Moneys are the riches of Pluto in which Hades's psychic images lie concealed. To find imagination . . . turn to money behaviors. . . . You . . . will soon be in the underworld (the entrance to which requires a money for Charon). . . . *For money always takes us into the sea, uncertain* . . . money [is] a kind of third thing between only spirit and only the world, flesh, and devil. Hence, to be with money is to be in this third place of soul, psychic reality. And, to keep my relation with the unclean spirits whether the high daimones or the low daimones, I want some *coins in my purse*. I need them to pay my way to Hades into the psychic realm . . . (A Blue Fire 174). (Emphasis added)

Both Ralph and Hillman turn to some common metaphors, such as coins in the purse, to describe the effect of money. In Ralph's sailboat image, putting "a little wind in her sails" is a way of sending her, in Hillman's words, "out into the sea, uncertain." The uncertainty of the money, instanced by the metaphor of the sailboat moving over unfathomable depths, alarms Mr. Touchett, who reiterates the metaphor to voice his hesitation to give Isabel the money: "You say you want to put wind in her sails; but aren't you afraid of putting too much?" Ralph answers, "I should like to see her going before the breeze," yet Touchett's analytical mind is not satisfied (161). He fears the risk of extravagance, and of fortune hunters. But risk is an essential part of the underworld journey; for the living, the ultimate danger is entrapment. Thus to give Isabel money, to possibilize her imagination, is to make her vulnerable in a way she, formerly poor, has never been before.

The underworldly perspective by which Ralph acts is so unlike worldly consciousness that it seems to Daniel Touchett "immoral" (162). Even Ralph admits to his resistant, yet acquiescent father, "But it's scandalous, the way I've taken advantage of you!" (163). Ralph's actions do connote a scandal: no other characters in the novel share his faith in Isabel's possibilities. Though Daniel Touchett is about to die, his son knows death more intimately. Ralph plays a distinct role in the novel: "he is always dying," as

Osmond points out with irony. Living on the threshold between life and death, Ralph is in a position to give Isabel the means to cross that threshold in her own way. He refuses to propose that Isabel marry a dying man--himself--though by giving her money he enables her to marry death in the form of Gilbert Osmond. Ralph's gift becomes an embodiment of the mythical connection among money, the underworld, and the imagination.

### **Critical Emphasis on Money**

The prominence of money in Henry James's fiction has been established by numerous articles and several book-length studies, many of which contribute to a mythical understanding of money in underworld passage. Critics note that money brings James's protagonists down to earth, and assists in their character development, yet it also carries with it a certain brutality of effect.

Newton Arvin focuses on money to disprove readers' observations that James's subjects are detached from "the real world" of financial necessity:

[James] has been called an apologist of the leisure class, and represented as the painter of a charming social world aloof from crude considerations of dollars and cents. . . . It is no secure and stately leisure class that James depicts. . . . It is a world . . . in which men have their eyes sharply fixed on the main chance and women know how to add and multiply, a world in which buying is done in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest, a world obsessed by the nervous craving for acquisition and haunted by the fear of penury. (438)

As a central motivation for James's characters, money lies at the heart of his critique of society: James's critical view of American and European society "exposed both societies to him . . . at their most vulnerable spot--the gross preoccupation with money," Arvin states (438). A typical practice in James's fiction is "marrying for money"; the locus of his plots is the "marriage-market" (440). Money gives place and desire to the social world, the relationships between men and women, and the form of marriage. The desire for money lies beneath the surface of marriage in James's fiction; money seems a soft underbelly of the marriage form, where it lies close to the ground, vulnerable to greed and avarice (such as Osmond's) yet open to gut-reactions such as Isabel's impulse to subordinate her marriage to her longing for Ralph, who arranged for the money in that marriage. Thus money reveals the psychologies of each spouse.

Jan W. Dietrichson, like Arvin, discusses money as the site of social criticism. Money prevails as a motivation and a metaphor throughout James's fiction, as Dietrichson thoroughly demonstrates. James stands out among authors of The Gilded Age--that period of American prosperity and exploitation following the Civil War--who focus on the negative aspects of money:

To Henry James, money did not only mean security from want and release from toil, but also the opportunity to indulge the needs of the

imagination, for instance by acquiring exquisite works of art. An easy competence had a special value for what was to him life's real goal: the enlargement of consciousness and the enrichment of the imagination. It gave a person freedom to travel in Europe where he would lay up treasures of the mind through visits to art galleries, museums and theatres. It gave scope to a man's creative gifts, and for this reason it was of special value to pictorial artists and fiction writers.

Money also gave advantages of other kinds, for instance the chance to live generously and help others. (379)

Dietrichson defends the positive aspects of money against those who see only its sordid side, noting the advantage of generosity, yet he presents a small view of what it means to satisfy the imagination with money, limiting the possibilities to artistic appreciation and travel. His study attempts to establish "an over-all view of the meaning of money for the formation of human character and morality" (31). Remaining on the surface of money and morality, however, Dietrichson neglects the formative effect of the encounter with money's sordid side.

John Antush, like Arvin, focuses on the grounding aspects of money, for money serves as a link to keep the mythical world of Jamesian characters tied to the earth. He cites James L. Roberts's thesis: the world of James's characters is "a mythic world floating above the earth but anchored to the earth by a strong chain." Appropriating the metaphor, Antush suggests that "the delicate but strong chain which binds the Jamesian world so firmly to earth is

money" (125). Certainly, money serves as a link between the mythic world and the earth, but the mythic world James explores lies not above but beneath, for James's world is not the realm of the gods but the realm of the dead. Thus, money grounds the high aspirations of James's fiction and leads beneath the surface of plot and character to the underworld.

Antush agrees with Dietrichson that money possibilizes the development of both individual and society, pointing out that "Money creates the very atmosphere around [James's characters] and moves them to their appointed destinies" (126). Indeed, it moves Isabel toward her encounter with the underworld. Furthermore, Antush writes that James's work shows

a singular reverence for the human individual and a belief in the development of his powers. Money makes this development possible just as it makes modern civilization possible; yet money represents in James's metaphysic an oppressive weight of corruption. The Portrait of a Lady is an affirmation that the power of intelligence can cope with this weight. (133)

Though money's developmental powers seem clear, and its oppressive, corruptive weight seems considerable, Isabel does more than simply "cope with" or endure it. Rather, Isabel's money eventually becomes the means by which she actively engages the world; she is transformed by what she discovers in the world and desires, in turn, to transform it.



Donald L. Mull claims that Portrait is "the first of James's novels in which the fact of money is the nexus of meaning, the 'key to it all'" (12). Commenting on the autobiography of Henry James, he notes a tension between

money as the source of potential imaginative experience and . . . mere hard cash by which one had to live. That tension carried over into his fiction as the metaphor for an even greater tension, the dilemma of the imagination in its encounter with the world. (12)

Money is central to James's own imaginative experience of the world as well as Isabel's. Like the aforementioned critics, Mull sees that money is integral to the development of Isabel's imagination. Money is symbolic throughout the novel, but more significantly, money is seen as a symbol by Isabel herself, Mull suggests. She uses money to negotiate her relationship with the world; transferring its burden to Osmond by means of marriage, she attempts to escape the responsibility entailed by possessing the money. Mull is careful to show that to symbolize does not mean to simplify:

For money is not just 'cash' and/or 'imagination'; it symbolizes the entire realm of thought from which it can be seen as either. . . . As a fact, it is both brute and imaginative--and also somewhere in between, as the imagination apprehends its brutishness. (144-45)

Mull discovers that money stands for the infinite possibilities of the imagination, and he insightfully discerns the dark side of imagination and money: its brutishness. Again, Mull resists oversimplification: there is a complex interplay between the imaginative and the

brute. The imaginative must admit its dark side, its brutishness, he clarifies.

In the same vein, William H. Gass calls attention to "The High Brutality of Good Intentions" in his essay of that title. Whereas Ralph intends to satisfy Isabel's imagination by giving her money, that good intention holds brutal consequences, for "Now she prefers corners," he observes (699). Adopting Daniel Touchett's skeptical stance in the novel, Gass doubts that Isabel is as good as Ralph thinks she is. Though Isabel falters in marrying Osmond, she surpasses Daniel Touchett's and even Ralph's capacity to fathom her goodness when she returns to Osmond at the end of the novel. Isabel's imaginative ideals are shattered by her underworldly experience with Osmond, yet it prepares her imagination to encompass the brute consequences of her life, enabling her to choose the limitations and challenges of trying to improve Osmond's world, an act that requires utmost imagination.

Jean-Christophe Agnew discusses money in its historical and social implications in Portrait, claiming that a consumer culture affects the way people exist in relation to one another, creating a "social marketplace" wherein people become commodities. What attracts them to the marketplace, he maintains, is their "desire to please":

Madame Merle is perhaps one of the most celebrated instances of the achieved marketplace identity. Isabel Archer finds it impossible to think of

Madame Merle 'as an isolated figure.' She seems to exist only in relation to her fellow mortals. (85)

As we know from the novel, Merle and Osmond have made a life of the studied effect of appearances; former lovers and parents of Pansy, they forgo marriage for the sake of finding rich spouses. Merle hides her maternal bond to the girl, seeming an accomplished and childless widow, to improve her and her daughter's chances for lucrative marriages. She secretly arranges Osmond's courtship of Isabel so he may marry rich. Agnew claims that Osmond's and Merle's highly developed sense of propriety, their practice of being appropriate, enables them to appropriate others, Isabel in particular. Agnew's method is provocative: extending the passive nature of being appropriate to its active form, *to appropriate*, he shows that the flip side of the desire to please is the desire to acquire and the ability to manipulate others.

Yet Agnew claims that Isabel stands outside these proprietary characteristics because when she first meets Osmond, she is unable to produce the slick impression she wants to have upon him. As her later meditation reveals, however, Isabel was in fact able to suppress her strong-willed character during her courtship with Osmond, producing a false impression of amenability. To use Agnew's thesis against his interpretation of Isabel, it was because her amenability pleased Osmond that she was able to appropriate

him. For after she marries Osmond, James writes, Isabel is pleased that "the finest . . . manly organism she had ever known had become her property" (358).

Osmond's proprietary hold upon his wife hinges upon her ability to represent him by masking her own character. In her over-dressed, heavily jeweled appearance before guests, she appears to Ralph to represent Osmond. Yet Isabel resists the "commodity culture," according to Agnew:

Her ultimate triumph comes only when she casts off her mask . . . an act that raises her above the sorts of exchange to which she is, in form, submitting by her marriage to Osmond. In filling the frame of the portrait so many have constructed for her, Isabel discovers within herself a plenitude that resists the consuming vision. (86)

Agnew claims that Isabel resists making the "consuming vision" of money her own, that she rises above her culture in order to resist its depersonalization. From a mythical point of view, however, it is not by detaching oneself from the culture of money but by participating in it, by descending with it, that one achieves a certain vision.

Peggy McCormack, in her study of gender and exchange economy in James, The Rule of Money, states that "gender in James's fiction is less of a determinant than is wealth upon a character's outcome" (6). Yet she concludes her chapter on The Portrait of a Lady by stating:

In James's stories, verisimilitude is defined by the almighty dollar . . . because it always determines the necessities and consequences of characters' lives. Money's logic may be

characterized as masculine since its presence or absence is relentlessly deterministic. (32)

Despite her initial distinction between the determinism of gender and wealth, the critic conflates the power of money with masculinity. Calling it deterministic and masculine, she seems, like Agnew, to sense a darkness or doom in money, measuring the strength of money's pull as it draws one toward one's fate. Mythically speaking, her thesis brings to mind Hades himself, eminently masculine and deterministic, who abducts Persephone into his rich underworld. Indeed, Persephone's fate is one that Psyche is at pains to resist during her quest for Eros. Yet Isabel's story often seems more like Persephone's than Psyche's in her final return to the underworldly realm of Osmond.

To critics, the negative aspect of money is clear. (Even when Dietrichson enumerates the positive aspects of money, he limits them to cultural enrichment and helping others.) Concerned with morality or social order, Dietrichson, Agnew, McCormack and Antush find in James a critique of individuals and society, and an imperative to overcome the power of money. Yet money and all its curses lead to the development of the psyche. From an underworld perspective, the power of money is not limited to the upperworld system of exchange. Money opens the way for another venue, the journey to the underworld, where its

possessor examines money's brutishness, partaking in the knowledge of death and discovering what outlasts death.

Interpretations partial to Marx identify the all-pervasive aspect of money, as it darkens both individual and society. These critics seem to apprehend the underworld brought to the surface by money. In some unconscious way, commodification makes present the underworld, the realm of the psyche. No longer must one excavate human nature in order to reach the psychological realm: where the problems of money are ubiquitous, Hillman suggests, the psyche is made present (A Blue Fire 173-75).

A mythical understanding of money suggests that Isabel tries to transcend the sordid aspects of money. She sees it as a weight or burden, emphasized by the 70,000 English "pounds." Ironically when she tries to rid herself of that weight by transferring it to Osmond, she is brought into the underworld, into intimate contact with the vulgarity of the world.

### **Girlish Goodness and the Longing for Darkness**

While money gains Isabel entrance into the underworld through her marriage, her descent is suggested in the first scene of the novel where James literalizes the foreshadowing technique. The ceremony of tea upon which Isabel enters into the novel takes place in the afternoon when

the shadows were long upon the smooth, dense turf.  
 . . . The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight  
 and angular; they were the shadows of an old man

sitting in a deep wicker-chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and of two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him. (17)

Not the men, but their angular shadows are first described; such shadows populate the underworld terrain that remains subtle yet persistent throughout the novel. Hillman maintains that "Shadow is the very stuff of the soul, the interior darkness that pulls downward out of life and keeps one in relentless connection with the underworld" (Dream 56). The soul is at home among shadows; the complementary relationship between masculine shadows and the feminine psyche figure suggest a longing for wholeness symbolized in the union between Eros and Psyche. Isabel's underworld is formed by shadows cast by masculine figures, suggesting their role in making the underworld present to her. It also represents their longing for the soul, their desire to keep it present. When Isabel enters the scene, she carries the hope of healing their disinterest in the world.

The "desultory talk" concerns Lord Warburton's complaint of boredom, for which Ralph and Daniel Touchett suggest an interesting young woman as a cure. The Touchetts, though free from the psychological illness of ennui, suffer physical illness. Though each of the three men is rich, their collective illnesses represent a disparity between body and soul that money alone cannot make up for. They long for wholeness and healing. "The ladies will save us . . .

that is the best of them will," suggests Daniel Touchett, indicating the hope that some woman may offer them relief (23). His comment foregrounds Isabel's entrance into the novel with an implied definition of the task of the modern lady: at her best, she will be able somehow to heal the disparity between body and soul.

Entering the novel from the door frame of Gardencourt, the Touchetts' English mansion, Isabel resembles a portrait of a lady. Her plot in the novel will seek to define precisely what that means in terms of her emerging position in the world. As she stands in the doorway, she stands on the threshold of two worlds by which the lady will define herself, not only the innocence of America and the experience of England that are usually noted by readers, but the upper- and underworlds of life and death.

In spite of the bright hopes that Isabel represents, critics discuss the dark imagery throughout the novel.<sup>1</sup> In fact critics are puzzled by the paradox of young Isabel's brightness and her attraction to darkness. Juliet McMaster writes that "Isabel is deeply ambivalent . . . she is ardently engaged in life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; but . . . she is morbidly attracted by their opposites, and devotes herself to death, and immobility, and

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Weinstein writes that "The darker motifs in the first chapter . . . frame the canvas on which [Isabel] will move" (38-39).



suffering" (50). D. Buchanan maintains that "Isabel's association with light is, at best, ambiguous." She says that Isabel has a "fascination with darkness as much as, if not more than, an association with light" (122).<sup>2</sup> Isabel's attraction to darkness indicates a desire for the underworld, what China Galland calls a "longing for darkness" in her autobiographical study of that feminine experience. (Galland's study will be elaborated in relation Faulkner's novel in Chapter III of this study.) Yet Isabel's adherence to her ideals, as Henrietta pointed out, keeps her from an imaginative encounter with darkness in spite of her attractions: she resists the deepness though she longs for it. As James writes,

her imagination . . . now hung back; there was a last vague space it couldn't cross---a dusky, uncertain tract which looked ambiguous and even slightly treacherous, like a moorland seen in the winter twilight. But she was to cross it yet.  
(265)

As Charles Anderson points out, most of the novel's "vistas" take place in the waning afternoon or twilight (108). This imagery suggests Isabel's figurative placement on the threshold between two worlds. Buchanan aptly points out that

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<sup>2</sup> Buchanan argues further that Isabel's lightness is "deeply implicated in darkness and blindness: 'a cool bath in a marble tank, in a darkened chamber, in a hot land' (391) and 'a swift carriage, of a dark night, rattling with four horses over roads that one can't see--that's my idea of happiness' (143)--'are tied to an ongoing strain of "quasi-Gothic indulgence in the pleasures of terror" (Porte 5) in which Isabel indulges in premonitions of doom'" (124).

the "tenebrous . . . most clearly expresses" Isabel's imagination "and its dangers" (125). She claims that "Isabel has chosen Osmond because he appeals to something in her imagination (particularly the dark side)" (128). Yet Buchanan equates Isabel's attraction to darkness to a "flawed aspect of her imagination" (128). Rather than a flaw, darkness is a necessary component of an imagination that can face challenges of impurity; as in Mull's understanding of the brutishness of good intentions, it is essential to the imagination. Though Isabel resists deepness, she longs for it just as the three men at tea long for the shadowed encounter with the psyche that requires the action of a woman. None of these men will marry Isabel, though one desires it and the other attempts it, yet all of them long for the wholeness that such a union represents.

Ralph demonstrates his familiarity to the underworld when he guides Isabel through Gardencourt and discusses, at her insistence, the ghost:

I might show it to you, but you'd never see it. The privilege isn't given to every one; it's not enviable. It has never been seen by a young, happy, innocent person like you. You must have suffered first, have suffered greatly, have gained some miserable knowledge. In that way your eyes are open to it. I saw it long ago. (51-52)

He has suffered enough to have experienced communion with the other world, of which Isabel remains innocent. Her curiosity about the ghost was aroused by novels she has read; like other modern heroes of the novel, Emma Bovary,

Lord Jim, and even Don Quixote, she searches for a world found in books. The underworld that Isabel encounters, however, is a realm not of novels but of myths.<sup>3</sup> It is the tradition of Greek myth that provides the underworld experience by which Isabel differentiates herself from European protagonists.

As James writes, Isabel has "an unquenchable desire to think well of herself"; she wants to do everything right and always be good:

She had an infinite hope that she would never do anything wrong. She resented so strongly, after discovering them, her mere errors of feeling (the discovery always made her tremble as if she had escaped from a trap which might have caught and smothered her) that the chance of inflicting a sensible injury upon another person, presented only as a contingency, caused her at moments to hold her breath. That always struck her as the worst thing that could happen to her. (54)

Isabel dramatizes even small errors that might sully her ideal self. Vopat writes that "as she cannot admit the existence within herself of 'bad' feelings, so too she cannot admit the existence in the world of evil or darkness"

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<sup>3</sup>Carole Vopat insightfully connects Isabel's fear of darkness to her bookish idealism: "Isabel cannot acknowledge the existence of dark forces which intervene between core and circumference, nor can she admit that surfaces betray, because she cannot live as a flawed self in an unpredictable world. Words must be signs of things and impressions adequate gauges of existence, for only then can behavior and experience be interpreted literally as a book" (42).

(44).<sup>4</sup> Isabel's fear of error, her denial of sin and darkness without and within is precisely what necessitates her underworld descent. For the journey educates the psyche out of its girlish goodness. She must be immersed in an error of her own making to come face to face with darkness, to test the goodness and imagination Ralph was so sure of when he gave her money.

Though Isabel is ignorant of the underworld before her inherited fortune takes her there, she demonstrates an attraction to the melancholy: when Mrs. Touchett arrives in Albany, she finds her reading alone in a dreary room. Scarcely educated, Isabel reveals her inexperience of the underworld when she declares to her aunt, "I'm not stupid but I don't know anything about money." Nor does she know that she travels to Europe at her aunt's expense. Laurence B. Holland offers this insight to explain why money is so prevalent in a novel about the development of a girl: "the attitudes toward experience and money [are] so intimate that the novel renders the one [in] the image of the other" (40). Isabel's self-professed ignorance of money exposes her innocence, her inexperience, her lack of knowledge in spite of her reading. Thus Isabel's ideals of self and goodness

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<sup>4</sup>Tony Tanner also writes of Isabel's reticence. Isabel "seems unprepared for any harsh encounter with all that indifferent otherness which is not the self, which is not amenable to the self, and which may well prove cruel and hostile to the self" (93).

and her resistance to deepness are reflected in her attitude toward money.

Dietrichson's explanation of the Protestant work ethic suggests the reason Isabel feels guilty about inheriting a fortune. In contrast to the Medieval view which valued poverty as a virtue, Calvinism redefined money as a reward for hard work. Yet the quick-earned money of the new rich was morally tainted, as it was often gained by exploitation. Even honestly earned money was suspect if acquired suddenly because the recipient didn't work for it. Isabel reflects this point of view when she says of her inheritance: "all of the delicacy had belonged to Daniel Touchett, and none of it to her" (358). She is reluctant to own the baser side of money.

Isabel understands the value of generosity, but she doesn't know how to receive a gift. The gift of money is a burden to her for she feels the weight of the money. (70,000 English pounds, as opposed to American dollars, seems to emphasize its heaviness to Isabel.) Moreover, Isabel's anxiety about her inheritance seems to anticipate Faulkner's distinction between Lena Grove and Joanna Burden: Lena accepts coins and spends them freely, whereas Burden is quite literally overburdened by the historical legacy she inherits.

When Isabel first discovers herself in possession of a fortune, she feels the weight of Ralph's gift. She suffers an

appreciable shock as if she knows it will change her life: "she suddenly burst into tears," Mrs. Touchett reports, "She's simply stupefied. . . . It has been as if a big gun were suddenly fired off behind her; she's feeling herself to see if she's been hurt" (181). Though Isabel is at first oppressed by the consciousness of wealth,

the girl presently made up her mind that to be rich was a virtue because it was to be able to do, and that to do could only be sweet. It was the graceful contrary to the stupid side of weakness--especially the feminine variety. To be weak was, for a delicate young person, rather graceful, but, after all, as Isabel said to herself, there was a larger grace than that. (182)

Isabel seems on one level to understand the depth of money; of course, shopping in Paris at Mrs. Touchett's insistence does nothing to fulfill her imagination. Isabel significantly perceives that money can be translated into the realm action; the ultimate outcome of her encounter with money, and the resultant descent to the underworld, will be seen in what she does.

McCormack states that because of Isabel's idealized conception of herself ("She was in the habit of taking for granted, on scanty evidence, that she was right" and she had a "liability to the sin of self-esteem" (101)), she has a "Transcendentalist-like disdain for the material aspects of [her] wealth" (61). Isabel believes her money to be "part of her better self" which "gave her even, to her own imagination, a certain ideal beauty" (24). McCormack

explains that Isabel conflates her own ideal of herself with her wealth. Because the money becomes a part of Isabel, it must fit into her ideals of herself. By virtue of her ownership, she believes, money can be beautiful.

Isabel perceives the connection between money and beauty, yet she interprets it the wrong way. She believes that in her hands, money may be transformed into something beautiful. Yet what occurs is not that she makes money beautiful, but that her overarching experience with money gives her own beauty a kind of depth she can only gain from an underworldly encounter.

Tanner points out, Isabel's initial aestheticization of her wealth implies:

a sort of romantic Platonism which she might well have found in her youthful reading. She wants to exist at the heights of sheer communion with ideal beauty. As opposed . . . to involving herself with the lower levels of un-ideal actuality. From the start she tests things and people by whether they please her 'sublime soul.' (94)

Isabel's disdain for money's material aspects keeps her detached from the real consequences of life, keeps her from developing the deepness of her soul. From the heights of her idealism, she resists the downward pull of money.

Thus, Henrietta knows that Isabel tends to resist moral exposure, as discussed above. She advises Isabel to put her soul into her life in order to encounter reality. And she adds:

You must often *displease* others. You must always be ready for that--you must never shrink from it. . . . You must be prepared on many occasions of life to please no one at all--not even yourself. (188)

Henrietta shows prescience in warning Isabel against the desire to please: it leads, as critic Agnew states above, to Isabel's appropriation of Osmond. In spite of all of Isabel's resistance to error, her marriage becomes an immersion into intimacy with her own error.

Such errors are part of the experience of the underworld. Tanner writes that Isabel's journey is "the journey of the developing but all-too-often erring self" (97). He sees that "her fear, her error, and her final resolution are crucial stages on a psychic journey which forms the very heart of the novel" (91). And the heart of this novel which James thought "too psychological" is the scene which he thought its best: Isabel's meditative vigil.

### **Awakening to the Underworld**

Isabel's vigil begins one evening when Osmond leaves her before the drawing room fire to ponder her role in Pansy's possible marriage to Isabel's former suitor, Lord Warburton. Osmond has just announced that Pansy, who is in love with Ned Rosier, will be placed again in the convent to give her time to think about obedience to her father. His psychological manipulation of Pansy parallels his treatment of Isabel:



She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond's beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond's beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. (360)

Her meditation is an exploration of her life in the underworld, in the figurative House of Hades the Palazzo Roccanera has become to her, yet the literal mode of her descent is psychological. James barely portrays the marriage ceremony, and does not describe Isabel's installation at the Palazzo: his subtlety emphasizes her arrival in the underworld as an interior journey. Hillman suggests:

entering the underworld is like entering the mode of reflection, mirroring, which suggests that we may enter the underworld by means of reflection, by reflective means: pausing, pondering, change of pace, voice or glance, dropping levels. Such reflection is less willed and directed; it is less determinedly introspective like a heroic descent into the underworld to see what's going on there. Let us rather imagine it to be more Hermetic, a cocked ear, a sideways look . . . or intuitional feelings and thoughts that appear in the midst of life and twist life into psyche. (Dream 52)

Isabel's meditation exemplifies such a reflection, a pondering upon images of her life. She begins with Osmond's words, the "something in them that made vibrations deep" and ends with "a remembered vision--that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated" (354, 364). (The settling of pieces into place anticipates Sethe's

recognition of Beloved's resemblance to her daughter.) In her meditation, Isabel intuitively feels the strangeness of Merle and Osmond's familiarity, though she does not yet suspect its deep-rooted effect upon her self. For the discovery of their secret challenges Isabel's ideal of marriage, the capacity of her goodness, and the ability of her imagination to engage what she learns of evil.

Isabel's examination of her life marks her return to a mode of reflection she has long been detached from. Ever since she left the "office" in Albany, that solitary "chamber of disgrace for old pieces of furniture," including a sofa to which Isabel confided "a hundred childish sorrows," she has never had a moment alone (33). Moreover, in the Palazzo Roccanera, she enjoys little of the classic feminine connection with the *oikos*. Osmond's "genius for upholstery" is evidenced in the decor of every room, as if he has effectively barred her from intimacy, though childish, with the things of the world. Moreover, she has no confidant. During their Thursday evening parties, Osmond installs himself before the fire, obstructing the woman's traditional connection to the hearth. Though Isabel is often displaced by Osmond, her night vigil occurs before the dying embers of the hearth. In contrast to Madame Merle, whom Isabel cannot imagine conversing with her soul--and whose soul, Merle claims, has been ruined by Osmond--Isabel is finally able to converse with her psyche.

In myth, Psyche's girlish ideals are subverted when she encounters Charon and gains entrance to the underworld. The far-seeing tower instructs Psyche to bring money with her:

Thou must not go emptyhanded through the gloom,  
but must bear in both thy hands cakes kneaded of  
pearl barley and mead, and in thy mouth itself  
thou must bear two coins . . . thou shalt come to  
the river of the dead, where Charon hath charge  
and asks the ferryman's toll. . . . For avarice  
lives even among the dead. . . . Thou must give  
this filthy graybeard by way of toll one of the  
coins which thou shalt take with thee. But  
remember, he must take it with his own hand from  
thy mouth. (Neumann 47-48)

As Harriet Eisman suggests, "Charon's filthy fingers in [Psyche's] mouth relieve her of any attachment she might have to the perfection of her earthly beauty" (39). Psyche's experience of that filth is intimately physical. Likewise, Isabel discovers that through her husband, who married for money, she is intimately united to ideas that disgust her. Her initiation into Osmond's philosophies, moreover, undermines her previous illusion of her husband.

Whereas Dante's descent is guided by Virgil, who has at heart Dante's emergence, Osmond accompanies Isabel to reveal the sordid side of life to the innocent girl:

he pointed out to her so much of the baseness and shabbiness of life, opened her eyes so wide to the stupidity, the depravity, the ignorance of mankind, that she had been properly impressed with the infinite vulgarity of things and of the virtue of keeping oneself unspotted by it. But this base, ignoble world, it appeared, was after all what one was to live for; one was to keep it for ever in one's eye, in order not to enlighten, convert, or redeem it, but to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority. (360)

The young Isabel could accept that one learns of the vulgar in order to avoid it, to remain "unspotted" by it.<sup>5</sup> Yet Isabel's deeper, mature impulse, as she emerges at the end of the novel, is to "enlighten, convert, or redeem" the vulgarity she witnesses. She would learn about the dark side in order to transform it, as opposed to Osmond who not only uses his knowledge of the vulgar to fuel his own superiority, but embraces vulgar ideas himself:

there were certain things she could never take in. To begin with, they were hideously unclean. She was not a daughter of the Puritans, but for all that she believed in such a thing as chastity and even as decency. It would appear that Osmond was far from doing anything of the sort; some of his traditions made her push back her skirts. Did all women have lovers? Did they all lie and even the best have their price? Were there only three or four who didn't deceive their husbands? When Isabel heard such things she felt a greater scorn for them than for the gossip of a village parlour. (362)

Whereas Psyche endures Charon's fingers in her mouth, Isabel is initially more resistant: she will "never take in" some ideas of Osmond, would not let them touch the hem of her garment. Her reaction is to resist contamination. Isabel sustains a clear idea of virtue until her ideals are challenged, and virtue complicated, by the moment of crisis in her marriage.

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<sup>5</sup>This aspect of Isabel, as an "Archer," aligns her with the mythical Diana, the virgin huntress, Lisa Appignanesi suggests (46).

Eisman shows how the myth of Psyche focuses upon the mysterious tension between goodness and the educative experience of the underworld journey. It teaches the

deep mystery of incorporating . . . our death into our life. For Psyche, it requires a relentless shedding of many qualities normally associated with being a good and beautiful person. She is called upon to abandon her compassion for a lame man, to ignore the pleas of the corpse floating in the Styx, to refuse help to the weaving women. She would be trapped by these appeals to her virtues. (39)

Before Isabel has encountered the mystery of death, she is surely "trapped by . . . appeals to her virtues." Pansy and Ralph both function as traps that increase or extend Isabel's underworld tenure. The tower had warned Psyche against these temptations:

all these snares and many others spring from Venus' crafty designs against thee, that thou mayest let fall at least one of the cakes from thy hands. But think not the loss of that worthless piece of barley paste matters but little; for if thou lose but one, thou shalt lose with it the light of day. (Neumann 48)

Whereas Psyche resists the snares of Aphrodite, Isabel is less shrewd, a girl of young America in contrast to Psyche of Ancient Greece. Her generosity, perhaps her greatest virtue, keeps her in the underworld. Pansy is used by Osmond and Merle to lure her into marriage and keep her there. The evil-stepmother myth challenges Isabel to be a generous parent to Pansy; in fact, Merle hopes she will provide Pansy with a *dot* and secure her a wealthy husband. And before departing to see Ralph in England, Isabel promises Pansy

that she will return. Responsibility for Pansy, many critics claim, is the main reason Isabel returns to her marriage, yet Pansy is not the only draw.<sup>6</sup>

During Ralph's final sojourn in Rome, Isabel pays her cousin visits of charity despite her husband's irritation. Once Ralph has returned to England, his request for her stirs Isabel's compassion once again; the moment Isabel hears of Ralph's impending death, she enters Osmond's study to inform him of her departure to England. Yet Osmond will consider her departure "a piece of the most deliberate, the most calculated opposition" to their marriage (445). He forces her "to choose and decide" (263) (that part of courtship she dreaded) between her compassion for Ralph and her respect for her marriage:

I take our marriage seriously; you appear to have found a way of not doing so. I'm not aware that we're divorced or separated; for me we're indissolubly united. You are nearer to me than any human creature, and I'm nearer to you. It may be a disagreeable proximity; it's one, at any rate, of our own deliberate making. . . . I think we should accept the consequences of our actions, and what I value most in life is the honour of a thing. (446)

Isabel knows that her manipulative husband speaks "blasphemous sophistry," that he uses the form of marriage for his own purpose, yet he has hit upon that which Isabel holds "sacred and precious--the observance of a magnificent

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<sup>6</sup>Millicent Bell writes, "One reason we snatch at, in the obscurity of her purpose, is her promise not to abandon Pansy" (782).

form." In spite of his manipulation, his words "represented something transcendent and absolute, like the sign of the cross or the flag of one's country" (446). Thus, Isabel's "idea of being a good and beautiful person," as Eisman put it, is challenged by the tension between her compassion for Ralph and her allegiance to her marriage. Isabel resolves to remain in Rome, maintaining her virtue and her ideal of the marriage form, which remains uninformed by myth. Despite her presence in the underworld, and Osmond's introduction, she remains uninitiated by it.

Yet Osmond's sister, the Countess Gemini, suddenly reveals to Isabel that Pansy is the child of Madame Merle; Isabel's marriage has already been subverted by Osmond's secret. Such a thing has never occurred to Isabel; the Countess remarks Isabel's virtue, her "pure mind" (450). Moreover, when Isabel expresses sympathy for Merle, the Countess laughs, "It's very kind of you to pity her. . . . Yes indeed, you have a way of your own--!" (452). Isabel's compassion belies the "responsive blaze" the Countess had hoped to kindle by revealing the secret (451). Yet deeper than Isabel's compassion for Merle's loss of her daughter is Isabel's own longing for comfort: "'Ah, I must see Ralph!' Isabel wailed; not in resentment, not in the quick passion her companion had looked for; but in a tone of far-reaching, infinite sadness" (452).

Hillman claims that one of the things that interrupts the *hieros gamos* represented by the marriage of Eros and Psyche is a third person. He suggests that

the triangles of eros educate the psyche out of its girlish goodness, showing it the extent of its fantasies and testing its capacity. The triangle presents eros as the transcendent function creating out of two a third, which, like all impossible love, cannot be lived fully in actuality, so that the third comes as imaginal reality. But it comes not as imagery in meditation but in the shape of actual persons, teaching the psyche by means of the triangle that the imaginal is most actual and the actual symbolic. (Myth 97-98).

In Isabel's meditation upon her marriage, she had pondered Madame Merle's odd closeness to her husband, yet it did nothing to pierce the marriage she holds to be the "single sacred act of her life." Yet when Merle materializes as a third party in the marriage, Isabel experiences her deepest pain, a necessary stage of the psyche. She, who tried so scrupulously to avoid error, realizes that her marriage was a mistake, and the oddness of Merle's closeness has been symbolic of that error. Longing to be with Ralph, she departs for England immediately.

Like many critics, Bell writes that Isabel "is freed for this act," for her departure from her husband, by the Countess's revelation (782). Yet Isabel's departure is undertaken not to demonstrate her freedom from the marriage bond but because the shattering of her ideal causes a suffering deeper than she has felt before. Moreover, her



final decision to see Ralph is not based upon his need for her, as in her previous visits, but is based upon her need for him. As her suffering has been psychological rather than physical, she is impelled toward someone who can share her suffering and who, unbeknownst to Isabel, shares the culpability for her marriage. Whereas Daniel Touchett doubts that Isabel is as good as her best opportunities, the disappointment of Countess Gemini's expectation of vengeance highlights Isabel's extraordinary goodness. Yet the risk of her marriage tests whether "the single sacred act of her life" can endure the logic of the psyche.

Henrietta makes an important distinction between Isabel's self will and her soul when she advises Isabel: "You must be prepared on many occasions in life to please no one at all--not even yourself" (188). In leaving her husband, Isabel puts aside her will to remain with Osmond, in favor of her soul's desire to see Ralph. For the discovery of her error fills her with the longing of Psyche for the lost Eros. During her visit, Ralph teaches her something that about the literal underworld upon which he verges: there is something even deeper than suffering. Pain passes, but "love remains." Moreover, Ralph gives a name to her error: "I don't believe that such a generous mistake as yours can hurt for more than a little" (479). He sees that her marriage was an act of generosity, yet he does not see that it was a means of distancing herself from the

consequences of money. Nor does he understand why Isabel would return to her husband.

Isabel's choice between Osmond and Ralph emphasizes the contrast between the two figures, especially in their relation to money. In the words of Lewis Hyde, author of The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, Ralph participates in the "gift exchange." Hyde discusses the poetry of Walt Whitman, who imagines the exchange of gifts in terms of breathing. What one breathes out, others take into themselves through the lung, the organ of sharing. Ralph's fatal illness is a disease of the lungs: his gift of money is tainted by sickness. It attracts headhunters, as Daniel Touchett had warned. Nevertheless, Isabel recognizes the generosity in Ralph's gesture, and she has unconsciously imitated Ralph by giving the money to Osmond, by coming to the marriage "with charged hands" (358). She also imitates, however, the brutal side of the exchange, its underlying purpose of disengagement. Like Ralph, who wants to know Isabel without marrying her, Isabel's exchange with Osmond is less than marriage: she comes to the marriage more as a mother than as a wife (as will be discussed). For when Isabel gives the money, she attempts to escape from its indelicacy. She wants to transcend its effects, though ironically, it contributes to her descent.

Osmond's use of the money image illustrates the extremity of his disengagement from life. During the

conversation in which his marriage reaches its crisis, his attention is variously focused upon his painting. Upon Isabel's entrance into the office,

Osmond was seated at the table near the window with a folio volume before him, propped against a pile of books. This volume was open at a page of small coloured plates, and Isabel presently saw that he had been copying from it the drawing of an antique coin. A box of water-colours and fine brushes lay before him, and he had already transferred to a sheet of immaculate paper the delicate, finely-tinted disk. (444)

When she leaves the office, his posture is the same. His meticulous attention to the coin, his attempt to grasp its image in paint, would seem to show an inherent connection between money and the artist: that money possibilizes his artistic imagination. Yet Osmond is simply making a copy of a copy of a coin: he does not make something new. He makes a transfer, not a transformation. His is not a coin in circulation but one removed from exchange, attended to only as an image. Whereas Ralph's money exchange has dire consequences, Osmond does not exchange money at all. Hyde maintains that money is erotic in that sense that its exchange creates relationships among people. Ralph and Isabel are united by the exchange of money, yet Osmond and Isabel are estranged by it. Osmond has taken Isabel's fortune and kept it out of circulation; his use of money not erotic but sterile. In addition, he stifles that organ of gift, the lung; Isabel describes his home as "the house of suffocation" (360). When Isabel saw "his rigid system close

about her, draped though it was in pictured tapestries, that sense of darkness and suffocation . . . took possession of her; she seemed shut up with an odour of mould and decay" (361). Moreover, Osmond's first wife apparently died of suffocation, "in the Piedmontese mountains, where they had gone . . . because her health appeared to require the air" after three years of marriage (450).

Compelled by the longing of her psyche for the comfort of Ralph, Isabel returns to England with a vision of her future:

She saw herself, in the distant years, still in the attitude of a woman who had her life to live, and these intimations contradicted the spirit of the present hour. It might be desirable to get quite away, really away, further away than little grey-green England, but this privilege was evidently to be denied her. Deep in her soul--deeper than any appetite for renunciation--was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come. And at moments there was something inspiring, almost enlivening, in the conviction. It was the proof of strength--it was a proof she should some day be happy again. . . . To live only to suffer--only to feel the injury of life repeated and enlarged--it seemed to her she was too valuable, too capable for that. Then she wondered if it were vain and stupid to think so well of herself. When had it ever been a guarantee to be valuable? Wasn't all history full of the destruction of precious things? Wasn't it much more probable that if one were fine one would suffer? It involved then perhaps an admission that one had a certain grossness; but Isabel recognized, as it passed before her eyes, the quick vague shadow of a long future. She would never escape; she should last to the end. Then the middle years wrapped her about again and the grey curtain of her indifference closed her in. (466)

Isabel's lengthy meditation illustrates the development of her thought from the rejection of suffering, and a sense of her own value, to an acceptance of her own grossness and suffering. In her soul, in her psyche, she does not want to renounce the life she has chosen. Rome and its ruins, "full of the destruction of precious things," have shown her the kind of beauty that endures the ravages of time just as Persephone has shown Psyche what kind of beauty endures in the underworld.

With her admission of "grossness" she begins to understand the nature of suffering and the purpose of her time in the underworld: suffering is a grossness that is necessary, not something she can escape by merely clinging to her sense of her own value, or indeed her own virtue. Thus, like Psyche, who ingests the dirt of the underworld, Isabel finally takes the grossness of the underworld into herself, and is prepared to endure it.

### **Returning to the Underworld**

Isabel emerges from the underworld to reveal her transformed understanding of generosity. Her marriage to Osmond, to whom she came with charged hands, was a generous gesture but also one that relieved her of the burden of money. She and Ralph agree that one should never regret a generous error, yet he is surprised that Isabel does not consider her marriage "over" (478). Other characters in the book, as well as numerous critics, register surprise or even

disgust at Isabel's return. Yet Isabel returns to her marriage with a generosity of a deeper form. It is no longer an ideal of virtue or a patronizing aesthetics, but a generosity that embraces the vulgar, the ugly, the threatening, the uncertain, the fearful. Ralph doesn't live to see Isabel's return, her ultimate response to the demand of her imagination and generosity.

In one of the final scenes of the novel, Caspar Goodwood offers Isabel an escape from her marriage, yet despite his intention, he resembles Charon, ferrying her way into the underworld. When Psyche awakens to the presence of Eros, he brings her to Mount Olympus. And in James's "The Jolly Corner" Spenser Brydon awakens from his underworld experience to the loving, reassuring presence of Alice Staverton. Yet the Eros figure is conspicuous by its absence in Isabel's story. As Holland suggests,

James had welcomed the challenge of an experiment--centering the interest in the unprepossessing girl's consciousness itself rather than buttressing the "'mere' young thing," as Shakespeare and George Eliot had done, with an entourage of equally important characters or an appropriate Romeo or Anthony. (14)

Isabel stands alone throughout the novel, despite the love of several men. Caspar Goodwood's attempt to persuade Isabel offers her a different world. He pleads with her not to return to Osmond but the haven he offers is one of escape.

Caspar Goodwood's kiss is like "white lightning" conveying a sensation that "wrapped her about; it lifted her

off her feet, while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth" (488). The imagery of that scene is reminiscent of Psyche's experience of Charon's dirty fingers in her mouth. Yet when Goodwood asks why she should go "through that ghastly form" of her marriage, she retorts, "To get away from you." Indeed, this is "only a little of what she felt." The rest is an impression of Goodwood's passion and the thought that she had never been loved before. Numerous critics interpret this scene as Isabel's rejection of passionate sexuality, but in this scene the passion is inseparable from the man: even while he kisses her, "she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with this act of possession" (489). Isabel rejects not passion in general but Goodwood in particular, the specific "you" she must get away from.

Whereas Goodwood's passion likens him to Eros, Ralph is the more erotic in terms of exchange: he becomes intimate with Isabel through the gift of money. Whereas Psyche's emergence is completed by Eros at the threshold of the underworld, Isabel makes another descent, returning to Rome and a long, difficult life with Osmond, illustrating the absence of an Eros figure and an acceptance of the underworld. She seems to align herself with Eurydice's or Persephone's more permanent residence in the underworld

rather than Psyche's emergence from it. Yet even Ralph rejects that fate, preferring to die at home in Gardencourt. As he tells Lord Warburton, "I don't want to die on the Sicilian plains--to be snatched away, like Proserpine in the same locality, to the Plutonian shades" (333). Ralph wants to go gently, willingly to his death, whereas Persephone is forced into the underworld, the victim of Hades's abduction.

In contrast to Persephone, Psyche is the victim of desire for Eros. Psyche enters the underworld compelled by love; as Ralph reminds Isabel, there is no love in death. Isabel is drawn out of the underworld by her love for Ralph, her need of his comfort when she discovers Osmond's secret relation to Merle. What draws her back is something different, illustrating a departure from the plot of Psyche and an affirmation that Isabel does fulfill the portrait of a lady.

### **The Final Portrait of a Lady**

During a party at the Palazzo Roccanera, Pansy's suitor Ned Rosier notices Isabel framed in a doorway, elaborately dressed and heavily jeweled to Osmond's taste. Rosier believes her to be "the picture of a gracious lady." Bell argues that "This sole reference to the novel's title suggests James's meaning. Isabel has become 'the portrait of a lady' by surrendering her free self; she is--for the moment--fixed in her role as Osmond's wife; framed, circumscribed, by the limitation of this definition, reduced



to type." (780) Yet the entirety of James's novel frames a different portrait over which Isabel had control.

While the lady comes to be associated with an ideal of manner and dress in modernity, the word "lady" stems from the Old English "hlaf-dig," meaning loaf kneader. (Servant is "hlaf-eta," meaning loaf eater; lord is "hlaf-ward," loaf keeper.) As the hands of lady are engaged in the task of kneading, making bread to be distributed to others, the term suggests not only generosity but physical engagement with earthly substance, in contrast to Isabel's impression of cool detachment in Rosier's view.

Yet Isabel's plot and the myth of Psyche resonate with the Medieval definition of the lady. The tower that instructs Psyche to bring coins for Charon and avoid the snares of Aphrodite also tells her:

Thou must not go empty-handed through the gloom,  
but must bear in both thy hands cakes kneaded of  
pearl barley and mead. . . . [T]hink not the loss  
of that worthless piece of barley paste matters  
but little; for if thou lose but one, thou shalt  
lose with it the light of day. (Neumann 47-48)

Psyche's hands, employed in carrying kneaded cakes, suggest the task of the lady and the dire consequences of losing sight of that task. These cakes are intended to ward off three-headed Cerberus; without them, Psyche could not emerge from the underworld. For Isabel, it seems that her generosity promises to ward off the most monstrous aspects of the underworld, of her marriage to Osmond.

Isabel alludes to the generosity of the lady during her meditative vigil, when she reviews her courtship and her motivation in marrying Osmond:

As she looked back at the passion of those full weeks she perceived in it a kind of maternal strain--the happiness of a woman who felt that she was a contributor, that she came with charged hands. . . . He would use her fortune in a way that would make her think better of it and rub off a certain grossness attaching to the good luck of an unexpected inheritance. (358)

Isabel's "charged hands" suggest the responsible generosity of the Medieval lady, yet she uses that goodness to shield herself from the grossness of money. Beneath the surface of her lady-like gesture lies her resistance to the "sullyng" effect of money (to use Morrison's term). Though Isabel enters the underworld in the attitude of a lady, and strikes an imitative pose in its midst, it is not until her return to Rome that she fulfills a portrait of a lady whose generosity encompasses the grossness of her task.

Isabel's money and the suffering it brings her have initiated her into the depths of the underworld where she intimately experiences the grossness of that realm that mirrors the depths of her own psyche, a suffering strong enough to educate her out of her ideal of marriage. Having made the greatest error of her life in generosity, she gains knowledge of what that quality fully entails. Now she can bring not only her money to her marriage but herself; as Henrietta advised, she can "put her soul into" it. The

generosity of the lady and the depth soul are thus unified in her return. Rather than the escape Goodwood had offered, Isabel engages the world. In contrast to Osmond's detachment from vulgarity, Isabel returns to fulfill her initial urge to "convert, redeem and transform it." This task which will demand more imagination than Ralph has seen in her.

The end of the novel does not elaborate but merely reports Isabel's return to Rome. When Caspar Goodwood inquires after Isabel, Henrietta informs him of her departure. As Goodwood turns away in disappointment, Henrietta "put out her hand and grasped his arm," telling him "just you wait." She believes "she had given him now the key to patience." Though Goodwood finds it a "cheap comfort," Henrietta thus closes the novel with a small gesture of generous intention that reflects the larger gesture of Isabel's return to Rome (490).

Isabel entered the novel amidst the hope that the best of the ladies might save the men from their restless spirits; having answered the demands of her own soul, her longing for the comfort of Ralph in spite of the risk to her marriage, she exits the novel prepared to challenge Osmond's rejection of the vulgarity of the world and his abuse of the forms that acknowledge the dark aspects of human nature. Isabel's return represents a striving toward the unity of soul and body as she brings her acquired wisdom and her whole self back to the detached disdain of her husband; she

has a life of work ahead of her before she emerges again into the light of day. Though Ralph believed his gift to Isabel was a generous failure, he witnessed the drama of a psyche awakening to the underworld of suffering and gaining a new wisdom from that experience. Though he gratified his imagination by giving her the money, she has yet to gratify hers.

James's version of the Psyche myth immerses Isabel in the underworld. Though at first she tends girlishly to keep her sublime soul detached from matter of the world, she carries with her the hopes of healing the divorce between spirit and matter, soul and body. Her descent is an interior movement by which she comes to know her own error and the pain of her own psyche, but it also suggests a larger movement of consciousness of the underworld and the longing for the still-distant wholeness represented by the marriage of Eros and Psyche.

Isabel suffers the lack of Eros in her return to the underworld, suggesting, like Henrietta's minor gesture, the need for further duration in that realm, not only for herself but for the American literary imagination. She also carries with her the concept of the lady that experiences a renewed contact with the grossness of the underworld, an encounter that possibilizes an imaginative, full-handed engagement with the world, including its darkness. Whereas Osmond's portrait of a lady is Isabel transcending the

vulgarity of the world, Henry James portrays Isabel's conscious descent to the underworld. She is not finally ensnared there by girlish goodness or appeals to her compassion, rather, she returns in a gesture toward wholeness, of actively engaging her life with Osmond.

## **Chapter II. Caroline Gordon's The Women on the Porch: The Double Pattern and Emerging in Beauty**

Whereas Henry James's version of the Psyche myth focuses upon one character, Caroline Gordon's version focuses upon a married couple, extending the implications of the myth beyond the female protagonist to include her husband. The woman's plot evokes Psyche's separation from Eros, her descent through the underworld and her emergence in beauty, a beauty Gordon defines as one of creative, responsible action. The man's plot, exploring the dramatic effect of the woman's descent upon her intellectual husband, reflects the impact of the Psyche myth on the modern mind.

The separate plots of Catherine and Jim Chapman ultimately converge in affirmation of the *hieros gamos* exemplified by the sanctioned union of Psyche and Eros. Yet the wholeness signified by marriage is not attained quickly or easily; rather, the husband and wife each suffer a particular ordeal. Gordon begins the novel in the midst of separation to explore what kind of action is required of the wife and husband in order to achieve that wholeness.<sup>1</sup>

Catherine's husband, Jim Chapman, is a historian whose intellectual life remains disconnected from his wife. Representing the modern mind detached from the body, he has

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<sup>1</sup>This emphasis is characteristic of Gordon's body of work. Jill Fritz-Piggott states: "As almost all her critics conclude, Gordon stresses not the attainment, but the difficulty of union or unity" (217).

lost his muse and is unable to write. He seduces a beautiful fellow historian, as if possessing her will grant him the unity of mind and beauty she embodies. Yet the affair drives his wife away, and he comes to discover that he may regain his inspiration solely by coming to know the feminine underworld through his wife.

Catherine Chapman's departure from her husband follows the inward and downward directions that approach the psyche. She descends to the underworld of her female ancestors, and turns inward to her aching psyche, a turn that threatens to sever her from responsibility for others, specifically her husband. Compounding that inward turn and its isolating effect, her kinship and intimacy with the underworldly realm is manifested in her incestuous union with her cousin.

Critics often note that Gordon's work has not received the attention it deserves. Her life, however, as a southern woman novelist and the wife of Allen Tate, has inspired three recent books by biographers who interpret her fiction in light of her life.<sup>2</sup> Because Gordon's marriage to Tate

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<sup>2</sup>Ann Waldron (1987) Veronica Makowsky (1989) and Nancy Lee Jonza (1995) discuss Gordon's struggle as a woman writer, a topic of contemporary interest. As Gordon's friend and fellow writer Andrew Lytle writes, in terms of the prevailing mores of her day: "A woman who writes either fiction or verse, particularly if she is married, has problems a man doesn't have. Keeping a house makes daily demands. If she has a child, her responsibilities obviously increase. Neglect of her work or child can make her wretched, and the demands of each usually conflict" (5). Maintaining a high standard of hospitality (of which Lytle was often the recipient), housing and entertaining numerous

suffered two divorces (they remarried shortly after their first divorce), it may seem ironic that she would devote a novel to the subject of marriage. One writer claims that The Women on the Porch "was a subtle yet scathing analysis of her relationship with Allen" (Jonza 234).<sup>3</sup> In fact, Ann Waldron reports that "Allen often cited The Women on the Porch as an example of how little Caroline knew about marriage. He asked her why Jim was unfaithful to Catherine, and when Caroline said she didn't know, Allen said that proved his point" (224). Yet the novel itself reveals more than either party admitted on that occasion, demonstrating the limitations of merely biographical readings. Readers of the novel cite multiple explanations for Jim's infidelity: Catherine's inward turn, Jim's desire to reinvigorate his intellectual life, and Jim's jealousy of the artist who paints Catherine's portrait. Moreover, Gordon's own experience of division would seem to give her the insight to explore what lies beneath the surface of marriage.

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writers and family members, Gordon wrote eight novels and several books of short stories. The Women on the Porch (parts of which were written by hand, leaning on the dresser in her dying father's hospital room) is her sixth novel. It is thought by some critics to be her best novel, thought by Gordon to include her best writing (Jonza 234).

<sup>3</sup>Catherine and Jim Chapman offer some resemblances to Tate and Gordon. Jim is a teacher and writer who has lost his muse, a loss often suffered by Tate. Catherine's practice of putting words in the mouth of her dog was a pastime enjoyed by Gordon. Other characters also resemble the author: she shares with Catherine's cousin Daphne an odd passion for collecting mushrooms.



Whereas biographical readings constrict the significance of the novel, a reading informed by myth opens up a means of delving beneath the surface action of the novel, approaching the level of psyche that informs action in the upper world. As Virginia Arbery suggests, "Catherine's reflections draw the reader beneath the rather thin surface action between her and her husband into the realm of psyche, configured as the bowels of the earth" (10). Though marriage signifies the achievement of wholeness, it is through the aperture provided by the broken marriage that Gordon is able to explore what is at stake in the marriage, and why each spouse must participate in the Psyche myth.

Moreover, mythic parallels, as opposed to biographical readings, tap into verities that existed long before the birth of the writer. Gordon's work was consciously informed by ancient myth.<sup>4</sup> Of The Women on the Porch, the novelist herself states: "If the story has any form it is that of a myth, Eurydice and Orpheus." She was "haunted," she admits, by the music of Gluck's opera, Orfeo ed Euridice, and

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<sup>4</sup>Of Gordon's body of work, Lytle writes: "Contemptuous of the fad to read and judge an author by his political views, she penetrated deeper into Europe's cultural sources, its shaping forms, through the Roman Catholic period, and at last still further back into our classical heritage. She searched the mythological mind of prehistory with all the care of an archaeological dig" (11). While Gordon's search achieved its greatest depth in her last novel, The Glory of Hera, she clearly searches into mythological minds in The Women on the Porch.

impressed by his version of Eurydice's myth (Cowan, Preface vi). Gordon's novel suggests that she was particularly struck by Gluck's revision of Eurydice's fate: whereas the ancient Orpheus fails to retrieve his wife from the underworld, Gluck's new Orpheus succeeds. Eurydice's return to the underworld (which resembled the choice of Isabel Archer) is transformed into a permanent emergence, like that of Psyche when rescued by the god Eros.<sup>5</sup> Both Gluck's and Gordon's revisions of Eurydice's tale make her more like Psyche, whose underworld descent is a path toward emergence.

In wry defense of her use of myth in the novel, Gordon wrote: "I know that Orpheus and Eurydice is an awfully old story, but I thought that if I let hell yawn between husband and wife there might be some little interest in the situation" (Waldron 223). The effect of letting hell yawn opens the underworld to the exploration of its dark powers to portray the transformative effect of the descent. It also allows the lower realm to intrude into the upperworld, anticipating Beloved's eruption into the upperworld in Morrison's novel. The holistic logic of the Psyche myth carries the couple from the yawning divide toward reunion.

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<sup>5</sup> According to Louise Cowan the god Amor, the Roman counterpart to the Greek Eros, grants life to Orpheus and Eurydice because they are willing to take the risk of loving (Preface vi).

### **The Double Pattern**

The double plot of wife and husband is characteristic of Gordon's epic vision that depicts the action of the hero on the upper pattern and the realm of the psyche on the lower pattern, which at times erupts into the upper level. Though Jim Chapman follows his wife to her underworld, where she enacts Psyche's descent, his simple presence there does not give him access to that world; communications from that realm intrude into his consciousness in extraordinary ways, through dreams, visions, portraits of ladies, and even music.

Gordon's use of a double pattern in the novel emphasizes her portrayal of two different experiences of the Psyche myth. Bainard Cowan's comment on Gordon's The Glory of Hera applies to each level of plot in The Women on the Porch: "The darkness of this voyage, together with its images of obscuring and imprisoning meaning, suggests the modern psychoanalytic myth of the journey into the unconscious in order to channel its dark powers into the creative endeavor of the conscious life" (290). Though both Catherine and her husband undertake this kind of journey, their experience is different. Incidentally, Luce Irigaray, in "The Blind Spot of an Old Dream of Symmetry," criticizes Freud's assumption that women's experience is the symmetrical correspondent to man's experience. Exploring an apparent asymmetry, Gordon portrays the woman's descent to a

familial underworld while the man's consciousness is penetrated by communications from that subterranean realm.

Irigaray also maintains that "Western literature has portrayed wholeness as a union between man and woman; she is a metaphor for that wholeness. Yet first she must define her identity *separately*. She is the unconscious basis of that attempt to find a metaphor for an originary matrix in the sphere of intimacy with self, of nearness to self, of a 'soul' or a mind" (Speculum of the Other Woman 240). Like other Western Literature, the Psyche myth portrays the achievement of wholeness as a male/female union, the final union of Eros and Psyche. Yet the myth also elaborates Psyche's separation from Eros as an arduous yet necessary period of self-definition, so that she may emerge with beauty.

Gordon separates the husband and wife into two plots, exploring them apart before uniting them in an image of wholeness. Catherine's separation from Jim is necessary to her self-definition. Furthermore, the separation allows Jim to revive his intellectual ability. To be moved to the depths of his soul, he must discover something different about what women mean to him: neither a distraction from his work nor a visitation from a muse but an encounter with an entire realm of being that has a particular expectation of the hero.

Louise Cowan points out that in Gordon's "epic vision she sees life as manifesting a 'lower' and an 'upper' pattern--the first mythological and archetypal, the second historical and analogical" ("Aleck Maury" 29). The double pattern lends itself to parallels with the Psyche myth, wherein Psyche departs from the upper pattern of her love for Eros and descends to the mythical, archetypal realm of Hades. Likewise, in The Women on the Porch, Catherine departs from the upper pattern of her husband, a philosopher of history, to encounter the mythical underworld of Swan Quarter.

Gordon elaborates upon her vision of the double pattern, writing of The Glory of Hera (1972) and an incomplete novel whose working title was A Narrow Heart: The Portrait of a Woman:

The upper pattern purports to be my own autobiography but is actually the history of the lives of certain members of my family who have been associated, to some extent, with public figures. . . . The lower pattern winds serpent-wise through the upper pattern of action and deals with the archetypal world which the present day Jungians and the archaic Greeks inform us lies at the bottom of every human consciousness.  
(Stafford xvi)

The "lower pattern" exemplified by The Glory of Hera depicts the heroism of Herakles, while A Narrow Heart discusses the upper pattern of a writer's artistic vocation and place in the world, alluding to James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as much as Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady. In The

Women on the Porch Jim's upper pattern portrays his vocation as a writer in relation to modern intellectual consciousness and history, including the history of Catherine's family.

One of the ways the lower pattern intrudes into Jim's consciousness is through a woman's dream, twice removed from his own experience, that he later recalls:

a woman had once told him that in childbirth she had had a dream of an elevated railway, whose rails, instead of running parallel, diverged. She and her husband, mounting, for a lark, into the little saddle-like cars with which each rail was fitted, had realized only when they came abreast of each other and saw the rails spinning before them into space, that they were bound for infinity (120).

His recollection suggests his ability to learn from women's experience without being able to embody it himself. The elevation of the railway corresponds to his upperworldly plot while the occasion of the dream, childbirth, can be endured by him only in imagination. Yet that imaginative experience reveals something to him as if by way of intuition: his own separation from his wife threatens to be permanent. Wondering about childbirth prepares him for the life-altering communication from his wife and the feminine realm from which she comes and toward which she draws him.

Habitually, Jim's intellectual work is separate from his contact with women. As a young man who had just spent four solitary years writing his first book, he finds himself in a New York kitchen with Catherine's mother Agnes. As she chatters about her childhood home, Swan Quarter, its kitchen

separated from the house, he notices that though she is not bright, he finds her warmth and her Southern manner of speech compelling. When Catherine first meets him, she mentions her lack of brilliance even while he begins to fall in love with her. A decade later, Catherine having left him, he notes the faded beauty of her friend Molly Ware who states, "I may be dumb--in fact I know I am." Yet at the same time, Molly perceives his infidelity and rightly concludes that Catherine has fled not west, as he suspects, but south, to Swan Quarter (103). Veronica Makowsky laments that "Gordon's women, while intuitive and emotional, lack the masculine intellect which she considers superior" (160). Yet what Gordon seems to reinforce by way of these seemingly non-intellectual women is not a stereotype but a different kind of knowledge, one that attracts Jim yet challenges him to discover a proper response to it.

Jim's affair with the intellectual Edith Ross is a metaphor for the union of the intellectual and the feminine, qualities she embodies that he desires to possess himself. He comes to find, however, that possessing her does not grant him the unity he lacks; he must discover it by way of his mysterious wife.

### **Catherine's Descent**

Caroline Gordon considered Henry James her master in the craft of fiction, yet her novel not only extends but revises James's version of Psyche's descent. Whereas James

introduces Isabel to the underworld gradually and at great expense, Gordon portrays Catherine rushing toward the underworld from the first pages of her novel. While James brings the American psyche to Old World to portray its descent, Gordon's underworld is found within the country, in the American South. This geographical interiority reflects the interiority of Catherine's descent, a necessary self-analysis and return to her family that at its furthest extreme suggests the insularity of incest.

Gordon renders Catherine's flight from her unfaithful husband as a descent into the underworld in the first chapter of The Women on the Porch. The opening words focus on a detail: "The sugar tree's round shadow was moving past the store" where two men sit on the porch, drinking colas in the heat. Like the opening of James's novel, the setting is distinctly shadowed by the afternoon sun.<sup>6</sup> James's men discuss their own ennui, suggesting that an interesting

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<sup>6</sup>Both novelists also call attention to inverted conventions of gender: James notes that men are enacting the particularly feminine ritual of drinking tea in his opening scene, whereas Gordon begins with men on the porch rather than women, as the title of the book leads one to expect. The exchange of sexual roles in Gordon's work is associated with decadence, according to Radcliffe Squires, of which there are examples in the novel (474). Yet Faulkner critic Sergei Chakovsky suggests that reversals of gender roles presuppose the idea of an original, lost oneness like that envisioned by Aristophanes in Plato's Symposium. It is thus possible that Gordon is calling attention to the general separation of man from woman and the particular separation of Catherine from her husband, while positing an idea of the original oneness, represented by marriage, against which the separation is defined.



woman might cure their malady. Gordon depicts a similar weariness of soul; alluding to the lukewarm, whom Christ promises to spew forth from his mouth, she describes one man on the porch: "He raised the bottle to his lips. The liquid was no cooler than well water. He spat it out in the dust" (1).<sup>7</sup> That mediocrity also reflects Jim Chapman's career; as his friend sums up Jim's position at the university, "It's all too easy for you. You can run rings around the ordinary professor, and yet there's just enough to take the edge off your mind . . . you'll probably never write another book" (104).

Though the men on the porch anticipate the arrival of the ice truck to cool their drinks, Catherine instead drives up covered with dust, accompanied by her cthonically named dog, Heros.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Isabel enters James's novel with curative promise, Catherine's arrival in place of the ice truck clearly disappoints the men: she stops only long enough to share in their lukewarm drink and obtain the fuel

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<sup>7</sup>Larry Allums discusses Dante's *Commedia* as the main paradigm for *The Women on the Porch*. Like the tormented souls caught in the fore-hell of Dante's Canto III, the mediocrity represented by these men arises from an uncertainty of soul that keeps them on the threshold of hell where "they can place no hope in death, / and their blind life is so abject that they / are envious of every other fate" (46-48). Such infernal references evoke the underworldly setting of the novel.

<sup>8</sup>Heros denotes "a power of the lower world . . . the word in later Greek for a deceased person" (Hillman, *Dream* 111).

to continue her descent toward the isolated Swan Quarter. Rather than embody the answer to their desires, she suggests the direction of a cure for the "lukewarm," who include herself and her husband.

Catherine's drive from New York is a descent haunted by shadowy figures. Cars on the road form "insubstantial shapes" and Catherine is so frightened by "a dark, stumbling form" nearly struck by her that she stops the car (7). Her intention is suicidal, like Psyche's despair when daunted by impossible tasks; Catherine imagines driving until she is drowned by the Mississippi, that river that divides the country, reflecting her division from her husband. The river promises, she believes, a Lethe-like escape from the world's memories in death, an escape that anticipates Sethe's desires in Beloved. Catherine arrives at Swan Quarter where "Women were sitting on the porch":

One was old and stout and wore a lace cap on her white hair. Another woman, thin almost to emaciation and with black, restless eyes in a sand-colored face, sat close beside her, book in hand. On the steps below the two a wiry, middle-aged woman seemed just to have dropped down to rest. Her forehead, even the fine, brown hairs of her head, glistened with sweat. Her hands, loosely clenched, swung between her spread knees. (11)

Failures of love have stunted these women. Miss Kit, the grandmother for whom Catherine is named, betrayed the man she loved. Daphne Passavant, the cousin, was abandoned on her wedding night, and has never recovered from her rejection. Miss Willy, the aunt, will not allow herself to

marry the man who loves her. Catherine, fleeing from her husband, seems to know her place among them:

The faces, the immobile bodies swam in the western light. For a moment it seemed to her that she had never seen these women before; and then she knew them for her aunt, her grandmother and her cousin and she called out their names and ran toward them. (11)

"Immobile" yet swimming, strange but familiar, these women hover on the threshold between two worlds.

The book's title, The Women on the Porch, is supposed to sound "sinister," Gordon writes, and to the classically trained ear, this claim rings true. Ruth Padel points out that Greek tragedies began when a woman emerged from the door of a house, onto the stage that formed a sort of porch whereupon the tragedy was portrayed. Gordon explains that in her novel, "the porch is a sort of *stoa* to Hades," and critics elaborate upon this image (qtd. in Cowan, Preface v). William Stuckey writes that the "three women are like the three fates; and, in running toward them, Catherine in a sense runs to meet her doom; for the three women in their different ways represent living death" (69). He adds perceptively:

Miss Gordon suggests through symbolic imagery that the three women on the porch and the subterranean world that they inhabit is as old as Western Civilization itself. . . . Swan Quarter . . . is another instance of the kind of underworld that has existed in all times and all places where there has been a like failure of will. (77)

The women's failure of will parallels the men's mediocrity, introduced earlier. Residing in the isolation afforded by the past, the women are passionless, neither hot nor cold, yet frozen in deathlike inaction.

Gordon's rendition of the little-known underworld and the outcome of Catherine's sojourn there seem to disappoint feminist expectations for the heroine. Makowsky comments: "This bleak and sterile world is hardly a feminist retreat where women develop their strengths unmolested by men." She concludes that Catherine's decision to return home with her husband at the end of the novel is a mark of weakness (160). Nancy Lee Jonza, on the other hand, perceives the complexity of that realm: Gordon's "No Man's Land" is "a land at once empowering and terrifying because it was so entirely feminine" (239). Yet the biographer exaggerates Catherine's final achievement at the expense of Jim's, claiming "she would rescue them both" (238). Though Jonza notes the larger implications of Catherine's sojourn at Swan Quarter which represents "an almost primeval struggle between men and women," she finds Gordon's portrayal of Catherine inadequate (239). Jonza's final analysis of Gordon's novel resorts to biographical interpretation:

Perhaps she was trying to resolve in her art the growing tension in her own marriage. But just as she was unwilling or unable to admit to problems with Allen, she was unwilling or unable to make her narrative insights explicit. In life as well as fiction, she had to deny her heroine's wisdom and strength. (239)

Indeed, the meaning of the underworld is not spelled out by Catherine but mysteriously suggested in the multiple female voices at Swan Quarter, voices of the living, the dead, and the literary. Furthermore, the development and acknowledgment of a woman's strength, sought for by Jonza and Makowsky, is also depicted by Gordon in a less-than-obvious manner.

Gordon herself, in a letter to a friend, acknowledges the diminutive aspect of her heroine, yet she also points out the source of Catherine's strength, wisdom, and ability to effect her husband:

There was always in the back of my mind the feeling that she in herself didn't amount to much, but that the thing she had back of her, even in its decadence, made her in a way, the equal of her intelligent, gifted husband. . . . The woman represents the earth. It may be fine, rich soil or it may be barren. But any way, it is earth. (Jonza 237)

When Catherine returns to Swan Quarter from New York, she recovers her lost associations with the earth. Yet her ultimate reunion with her husband brings the wisdom and femaleness of the earth to unite with the masculine intellect embodied in her husband, reaching the kind of wholeness suggested by the image of Mary's Assumption.

Thus Catherine's identity, and the implications of her descent, extend far beyond her self. Drawn from her kinship with the women of Swan Quarter and their identity with the place, her collective identity encompasses the earth and

women of ancient times. Yet that timeless population of feminine figures gives the place an eerie cast; its purposes are often ambiguous. Catherine is alternately attracted and repulsed by that peculiarly familiar world in which she sees reflections of herself. Though it allows her insight into others' suffering as well as her own, it threatens to envelop her completely. Catherine must heed the warning given Psyche by the tower: "From its long-range view, the tower tells Psyche to look beyond the immediate impulse of pity and desire for comfort and luxury. . . . In short, this journey requires constant vigilance if the spiritual seeker is not to be swept away by the forces of the underworld" (Gollnick 140).

As mentioned, the women on the porch evoke figures of classic epic and mythology who extend Catherine's familial ancestry to ancient times. Cousin Daphne is an odd combination of the mythical Daphne and Persephone. Whereas Daphne turns into a tree when pursued by Apollo, Catherine's cousin turns to the study of mushrooms when abandoned by her groom. Collecting mushrooms, Daphne also resembles Persephone, whose innocence attracted Hades as she collected flowers in a field (Hillman, Dream 49).

From the moment of Daphne's rejection she has been intimate with death, even eating the mushrooms that link her to the underworld. Whereas Persephone married into the underworld, Cousin Daphne remains the unravished bride,

duped by her innocence, abandoned because of her poverty. Like the mythical Daphne, she turns to nature, to escape not the lustful Apollo but the fact of being unloved. Moreover, her refuge in nature cultivates its connections to the underworld; she maintains a brooding despair that rejects the vitality of life.

Wandering in grief through the woods of Swan Quarter, Catherine encounters Daphne, who commiserates with her: "You get used to it," Daphne assures her, stroking her shoulder. Yet Catherine is repulsed by the grip of her purple-polished nails: "'They'll come on down,' she thought, 'She'll take hold of my heart'" (41). Though Catherine escapes from the grip, she takes from Daphne a deadly mushroom, pondering her suffering for a moment: "*It was all right at first. I was numb. But the pain is a fire now. And all the time the mind running like wind and flames leaping up from embers that I thought were dead*" (43). Despite her acute pain, Catherine clearly rejects Daphne's cultivation of the underworld; as the young stallion, Red, suddenly canters toward her, she resolves to ride to the Manigaults' farm. Yet her cousin Tom merely offers a way of embedding herself further in the dead world of Swan Quarter.

Later pondering Daphne's failed marriage, Catherine is "overcome with compassion":

It seemed to her that everybody, that she herself, was like Daphne, half-crushed by some early misfortune and having to advance, maimed, through

life, cutting in the very struggle to maintain balance a ridiculous figure that somewhere must provoke mirth. And then she felt a revulsion against the woman, against the very house that harbored her. It is this place, she thought. (185)

In Daphne, Catherine sees what she herself might become as she wavers between repulsion and compassion. Yet Psyche's compassion for the weaving women in the underworld would keep her there forever, engaged in a task that appeals to her girlish goodness. Like Psyche and Isabel, Catherine is attracted to that ideal when she returns to the summer home of her childhood.

While Catherine cares for Miss Kit in Willy's absence, she thinks of Willy's patience with the old woman: "I must be like that. I must do everything as well as I can" she resolves, or else, she fears, her happiness with Tom would be "menaced" (197). As Miss Kit thinks, "Catherine was thirty-five years old but she acted more like a girl than a woman" (199). Yet the remedy for her childishness is precisely the separation from her husband that she suffers. Hillman suggests:

Our myth tells us that psyche suffers from love; a girl is tortured into womanhood, as a man's anima is awakened through torment into psyche, a torment which, as Neumann observes, transforms eros as well. . . . Their separation is the split we experience while eros burns, psyche figures out, does its duties, depressed. (Myth 94)

Indeed, while Catherine grieves and accomplishes familial duties, Jim, once tormented by her presence, is now tormented by her absence.



The very mystery of separation and intimacy is pondered by Catherine as she meditates upon her hatred for her husband:

Does everybody, at bottom, hate everybody else? That Russian somebody brought to the apartment once. He and his companion, lost in Siberia, had to walk for days within calling distance but out of sight of each other. 'But why?' I asked. 'Did you hate each other so?' 'We were the only ones,' he said. Do lovers, forever traversing a wide waste in which they are the only living beings, always come to hate each other? (41)

As the two Russians were paradoxically linked and separated by their aloneness and lostness, Catherine and Jim are likewise configured: the bi-level plot of the novel maintains their separation while allowing intrusions, sometimes as simple as the call of another voice, from one level to the other. Moreover, Catherine sees that even the most desperate of hatreds remains attentive to another's voice.

On her path through the underworld, Psyche must distinguish between her guiding love for Eros and appeals to her compassion that would ensnare her there forever. Though Daphne suggests the danger of too much compassion, Miss Kit suggests the danger of its lack. As she lies on the verge of death, Miss Kit is haunted by guilt. Throughout the Civil War, she remained faithful to her first love. Approaching him when he returned, she was able to accept his heroically received injury, his cold look, and even his violence, yet she could not bear his shaking. She fled without comforting

him and fell to the earth, grasping it with her fists as if she would be buried in it, absorbed into its larger power. But she married his brother. The betrayal, once forgotten, emerges into her memory now that Catherine has arrived, a betrayed woman committing her own betrayal.

Through Aunt Maria, the family's black servant, Gordon makes apparent the ancient resonances of the women on the porch. Maria also illustrates the precariousness of the inward turn, when one is tempted to dwell forever in one's sorrow. Maria has a son sentenced to life imprisonment for murder. Years ago she pleaded with Miss Kit's son, Jack Lewis, to help Jessie, but it was Jessie's second murder: Jack stated that nothing could be done. Enraged, Maria imagined cutting Jack's throat, and to her horror, discovered the next day that Jack had fallen from a horse and broken his neck. The superstitious Maria is convinced of her culpability. She planned to confess her "murder," but changed her mind when she witnessed the drama of Miss Kit's mourning Jack's death:

The cry rang out. Not a woman but a wild thing, roaming the woods and shrieking its grief into the night. . . . Miss Kit had got up out of bed and started across the room. Her nightgown was open down to her waist. Her breasts were showing. But she didn't care, running to the window and then to the door and all the time shrieking. They came and gave her some medicine the doctor had left and the shrieking stopped, like a chicken's when your hand closes over its throat, before you wring its neck. But you could hear it still in the room. And all the next day out in the cabin she could hear it.  
(164)

Years later, Maria recalls the voice when she wants comfort for her own sorrow at Jessie's incarceration. "She would never confess while Miss Kit had a breath in her body. I'll keep her crying out, she said, crying out for both of them" (164). Though her guilt seems irrational, Maria recognizes the timeless quality of Kit's lamentation and the profundity of her suffering. Kit's open gown recalls the grief of Hecuba who begged her son Hector "by these breasts which comforted your infant sorrows" to avoid sure death at the hand of Achilles and the fall of Troy, that city doomed to prove the sorrows of mortality (Homer 437). Resonant with ancient Greece, Miss Kits's eternal shriek signifies the lasting psychological nature of her suffering. The cry's endurance beyond its cessation by medication recalls what Henry James wrote of Isabel: "for physical suffering there might have been a remedy" (360). As it is, the suffering crosses the boundaries of time and space, claiming a value so extensive that Maria invests it for her own son. Like Morrison's *Stamp Paid*, she lives by the promise of salvation suffering brings, yet also like *Stamp Paid*, she overlooks the power of mercy.

Sacrificing the relief of confession to the extension of her mourning, Maria also reflects to Catherine the danger of succumbing permanently to grief. Catherine's own pain gives her insight into the suffering of other women, but she also notes the danger of becoming enclosed within it, cut

off from the world like Swan Quarter itself:

If your heart were broken, if a great fissure came in the center of your being, you might turn your vision inward, might from then on contemplate only what could be seen in those shadowy depths. People in the outer world would become ghostly. You would hear voices faintly and sometimes forget to answer, as a man, in the midst of an earthquake, standing on the edge of a precipice and gazing down into the earth's bowels, might not hearken to the voice of a companion, calling out to know the extent of the disaster. (184)

The isolation of Swan Quarter and Catherine's separation from her husband seem a necessary part of underworldly experience. Yet the danger of turning irrevocably inward, giving in to suffering, threatens to sever one from the world. It is an isolation more extreme than that of the Russians who, bound to be apart, keep at least within calling distance of each other. The fissure between Catherine and Jim parallels Catherine's inner division that threatens to swallow her care for her husband into a cataclysm of her own sorrow and pain.

While the other women's places on the porch are fixed, Catherine's Aunt Willy "seemed just to have dropped down to rest" in Catherine's first impression of the place (11). Nearing the change of life, Willy owns a beautiful stallion trained carefully by Mr. Shannon. Showing horses is a passion she rarely feels, but it gives her "that feeling of sudden, almost uncontrollable excitement that you never got at any other time, that she had never got since--and then over only a few horses. It would be like that if she showed

Red" (35). She wavers on the threshold of the underworld; though her active spirit holds promise, the end of the novel shows that her momentary place on the porch becomes fixed: she will not allow Mr. Shannon, whom she loves, to rescue her from that fate. The stallion, Red, represents her last hope.

Besides the women on the porch, the house is filled with "presences" who, when Catherine was a child,

had been the only companions that she could conveniently address. After she became a woman they had seemed at times to menace or at least prophesy evil. Four nights ago their voices had driven her out of the house, into the fog, into the arms, she recalled with a secret smile, of her lover. . . . But they were not here to warn or implore. Their voices were kind, their aspects gay. If they moved under the trees it was to dance. (191-92)

The presences are as comfortable now to her as they were in childhood, as if, playful yet deceptive, they lull her back to that state. Her intimacy with her cousin Tom, encouraged by the voices, threatens to ensnare her in the comfort of girlhood in addition to the comfort of nature that Daphne turns to, as will be discussed.

For Catherine, the subterranean aspect of Swan Quarter is revealed through occasional reflections and dreams as well as the women who live there. One dream illustrates her sojourn through the novel's lower pattern and describes the kind of path she traverses:

She had descended, with another woman, into a long, dark tunnel. A man, whose relationship to

her was not defined, had walked between them, resting a hand on the shoulder of each. The hand was cold. That was because the man was dead and now, called back from the grave, hovered between life and death. . . . [H]e walked beside her and kept his frail, intolerable hand on her shoulder. She was about to shake it off when somebody on ahead called back to her that she must be vigilant, that the man's safety depended on her alone. (183)

Allusions to Dante's infernal path and her Beatrician responsibility for her husband enter her consciousness.

Unlike Psyche's, Catherine's descent has purposes beyond her own emergence. Her dream prefigures her own Eros-like role in rescuing her husband from his intellectual abyss.

Resisting the permanent inward turn that she sees exemplified by Maria, Catherine must remain attentive to the outer call for her own sake as well as another's. Yet she must also distinguish between that call and the voices that would lull her back to childhood.

### **Portraits of a Lady**

Portraits, as artists' attempts to capture the physical or psychological likeness of a person, are often associated with danger; the ability to "capture" the subject in a picture suggests not only revelation of the psyche but limitations thereof. Long before photography, traditional peoples believed that to capture someone's likeness was to capture that person's soul; the attempt to portray the immortal principle of the subject gave rise to suspicions of capture and possession of the psyche. In the novels of this

study, portraits also focus upon a culture's definition of the lady and her psyche's urge to resist the limitations of portraiture.

In The Women on the Porch, portraits also suggest a certain precariousness. Since James's The Portrait of a Lady, as novelists focus upon women's underworld journeys, portraits seem to focus upon the woman's precarious position on the threshold of the underworld, framing the question of which way she will turn: toward emergence from the underworld or another descent into its depths, as in Isabel Archer's case. Portraits thus focus attention upon the lady while novels portray the action she takes. In Gordon's novel, moreover, portraits provide apertures for communications to the psyche, one of the means by which the lower pattern of myth and may emerge into the upper level of consciousness, or the dead may communicate with the living.

The first time Jim visits Catherine's mother Agnes, he notices the portrait of her great-aunt Amanda Morrison as girl scattering grain to chickens:

The oval face was dead-pan, the blue eyes expressionless. The little outthrust fist looked more like a fish than a human hand, but the frilling of the pantalettes, the surface of the muslin were executed with some finish, the rooster's breast showed a fine scarlet and his tail feather's a blue-green sheen that one would have thought it beyond the painter's powers to render. (91)

The "dead-pan" face, dull eyes and inhuman hand suggest the subject's absence of soul. The exquisite detail of her

clothes and the bird's plumage recall the image of Isabel framed in the gilded doorway, dressed to represent Osmond's superficial definition of a lady. Moreover, Amanda's inhuman hand contrasts the "charged hands" of active generosity by which Isabel defines the lady.

A portrait of Catherine, painted five years earlier, hangs in the couple's New York apartment, where Jim contemplates it in her absence:

A fair, long-limbed girl in a pale dress, sitting on a marble bench in the midst of improbable foliage, absently fingering the ear of a white unicorn. . . . Both woman and beast had long, light brown eyes that seemed to follow you about the room. . . . He gazed at the slim horn that sprang from the unicorn's forehead. (87)

In contrast to the blank eyes of her great-aunt, Catherine's eyes engage and return the viewer's gaze. The painter "had explained that you had only to have the sitter gaze at you continually as you worked to get that effect" (87). The effect is characteristic of an icon, painted to suggest the connection between two worlds, the earthly and the divine.<sup>9</sup> In this case, the portrait serves to connect Jim with his wife, who has descended to another world.

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<sup>9</sup> Dennis Slattery writes that "Dostoevsky uses the iconic image as both an instrument of education and the figure of hope. . . . For the icon is an image that, in capturing the dimensions of time, goes beyond the temporal to reveal the way in which eternity is embedded in time. . . . it reminds its viewer of a sacred past and teaches the way to reverence the physical order. The icon therefore promotes an awareness of the bond between earth and God" (196-97).



The portrait is the locus of tension between Jim and Catherine: the occasion of its completion set in motion their separation while the finished portrait inspires their reunion. Jim recalls his jealousy for the painter; he imagined that a horn erupted "on his own brow as well as the unicorn's." Jim's suspicion that Catherine gave herself to the painter promotes his own infidelity and Catherine's subsequent descent to Swan Quarter where she does finally cuckold Jim. Now gazing at Catherine's beautiful eyes in the portrait, Jim sees that the painter captured not her body but her soul and realizes: "He had never seen another human eye that so moved him" (89). The painter's art reveals to Jim the inadequacy of his own knowledge of his wife; thereafter, he follows her to Swan Quarter.

As Psyche's beauty attracts men's attention, it calls them to redirect their focus from the goddess to the mortal woman and her ensuing journey through the underworld. The myth implies that Psyche's descent is necessary for the men as well as herself. Similarly, Catherine's portrait, which captures her beauty, calls Jim to re-focus his attention upon his wife and her descent to Swan Quarter.

When Catherine, having left New York, meditates upon Jim's affair, she recalls, "But that was a long time ago. . . And besides, the wench is dead," alluding to The Jew of Malta, its theme of revenge tragedy, and the epigram of T.S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady" (40). In that poem, the male

writer exists in awkward relation to one woman in particular, femininity in general. He is implacably drawn to a relationship with a woman, the fruitlessness of which represents the loss of his muse and the inability to write. Perhaps this reflection gives Catherine insight into her husband's predicament. While Eliot's poetry indicates the modern writer's disparate relation to the feminine, Gordon's novel explores a solution by means of Psyche's journey through the underworld.

One final portrait of a lady, Catherine's Cousin Bessie, exemplifies the paradoxical separation and union of the married couple. In New York, as Jim imagines his wife in her room at Swan Quarter, he recalls:

Over the mantel hung a picture of a great-aunt died in infancy. The child, who had died long ago on a summer day of a surfeit of ripe peaches, had looked down all through her childhood on the child Catherine. (107)

The excess of a good thing, the peaches having reached their perfection, pushed the child over the threshold into death, indicating the fine line, the precarious threshold between an exuberant life and death, the crisis point at which these women are portrayed. Moreover, the painting recalls childhood, both the subject's and Catherine's. Miles from Jim, Catherine paces in her old room:

From the blur of shadows over the mantel a face looked impassively down at her, a solemn child's face, framed in dark curls. The little girl of eight or ten sat sidewise in a rope swing, her white, lacy skirts stretched out stiffly. One hand

clasped a doll to her breast, with the other she steadied herself in the swing. Cousin Bessie, who had died forty years ago of eating too many ripe peaches and ever since had been staring from that rope swing. (182)

The portrait immortalizes Bessie on that threshold of womanhood; a doll in one hand and the swing rope in the other, she wavers between child's play and the game of courtship (signified by the swing elsewhere in the novel). Gazing at the picture, Catherine is reminded of her friend Molly's insightful declaration that "it is childish to run away," to escape from her troubled marriage (182). The portrait "impassively" inspires Catherine's resolve to return to her husband in New York.

Yet like the painted Catherine, Bessie iconically stares back at the viewer, requiring her communication with the dead girl. Moving to the other end of the room, Catherine discovers that "Cousin Bessie's face was not quite so impassive. The black eyes held pin-points of light, the pouting lower lip seemed instinct with secret knowledge" (182). The pouting girl seems insulted by her premature death, anticipating Beloved's grudge that ensnares Sethe in her underworldly grasp in Morrison's novel. With similar intent, Bessie reminds Catherine that her Aunt Willy, who usually cares for Miss Kit, is away on the only pleasure trip of her life. Catherine's compassion and concern for her family override her resolve to return to husband; she decides to remain at Swan Quarter until Willy's return,

which doesn't occur until the end of the novel. Like a snare of Aphrodite, the portrait's appeal to Catherine's compassion detains her in the underworld of Swan Quarter, distracting her from her more crucial love for her husband.

A photograph of Tom Manigault's grandfather, Eph Cotter, contrasts the portraits of a lady in the novel. Cotter's despairing daughter, Elsie, a woman of fading beauty and restlessness, searches for a way to make a significant contribution with her life. Gazing at the portrait of her dead father, she asks, "What shall I do?" Yet Cotter was unable to guide her daughter in life as well as in death. Unlike the portraits of Catherine and Bessie, his picture conveys no reply. His is the "wisdom of an old, tired organism":

of the old possum that lies all night in its hole rather than drag its crippled leg over the snow to the henhouse, of the hawk that, discerning with fading eyes the flash of wings through the leaves, yet clings to its perch on the dead pine, preferring the faint pain of hunger which it has had for a long time and will have until it drops shrivelled from the bough, to the agony of the moment when, having struck and missed, it must beat upward through the empty blue. (243)

His unheroic inability to take a risk, to move forward against the odds, renders him ineffectual in his own life and the life of his daughter, whose superficial beauty fails her as she comes nearer to death. Without a deeper sense of beauty, she is incapable of action. With Elsie's unanswered question, Gordon illustrates the fate of those without

heroism or the beauty of soul that Psyche gains through her underworld descent.

### **Epic and the Feminine**

Gordon's version of the Psyche myth, as she portrays its impact on Jim, is informed by her attention to heroic action. The nature of the hero is Gordon's constant theme; in How to Read a Novel, she claims that "the adventures of a hero or heroine" comprise "the one true subject for fiction" (143-44). She also insists, referring to Chekhov's words, that "he and she are the engines that make fiction move" (Fitzgerald 831). Both claims are encompassed in her statement: "Women, of course, are always on the lookout for heroes" ("Cock-Crow" 560). For Gordon, the woman's perspective and attentiveness are crucial to the significance of the hero, traditionally a male figure. The novel also shows that the hero, in turn, must properly acknowledge the feminine, and must himself be "on the lookout" for heroic action.

Gordon's first five novels depict either the rejection of the modern hero, the paralyzed, introverted intellectual, or the challenges of the hero in historical eras when the role of the hero was well-defined, such as the Civil War or Pioneer America. In these five novels, Stuckey writes, Gordon shows "the modern world to be deeply hostile to the concept of heroism that she holds to be timeless . . . she had difficulty creating in a wholly contemporary setting the

kinds of heroes she admires." In The Women on the Porch, however, the author confronts the challenge of portraying heroism in the modern era. In this novel, Stuckey writes,

Caroline Gordon was ready to deal with the modern hero, the paralyzed intellectual, not because she had renounced her belief in the traditional hero, but because she had devised a way of having him escape the labyrinths of his tormented mind, reside in the world of flesh and blood, and assume ordinary human responsibilities. Even the paralyzed hero, then, would fit the definition of the traditional hero, if he could be made to act in a meaningful way. (67-68)

Yet before Jim may reside in the world, he must follow Catherine's lead in the descent, rather than Icarus's fatal pattern of flight. The labyrinths of Jim Chapman's tormented mind entrap him in a disembodied intellectual life; though he teaches Dante, he is blind to the infernal nature of his own life. Like men in Gordon's other works, he is a kind of artist who has lost his inspiration. Unable to recover his loss through Edith Ross, he finally follows Catherine to Swan Quarter.

The extreme gravity of his loss is manifested in his attempt to kill his wife (as will be discussed); equally extreme methods are required to penetrate the stubborn consciousness of the modern hero. As critics note, Gordon lends the effect of realism to the irrational so that communications from the underworld may emerge into Jim's

intellectual consciousness.<sup>10</sup> The extraordinary intrusions of the lower pattern into the upper pattern of the novel, through dreams and portraits, culminate in Jim's vision of a ghost.

When Jim's attempt at reconciliation becomes an attempted murder, he stumbles into the woods where, like Catherine on her way to Swan Quarter, he contemplates death by drowning (305). By a pool of water, on the turf of the hopeless women on the porch, he encounters a figure who changes his life:

A shadow detached itself from the low, rounded mass of foliage on the opposite bank, moved forward into the little light that hovered above the sandy beach. Chapman stood, staring at what seemed to be a man's figure, tall but dwarfed by the pack he bore on his back. The shadow wavered an instant, then sank slowly to the sand, as a man, breaking a wearisome journey, might sink at the foot of some tree, casting from him the pack that he had borne all day. (305)

As in previous novels, Gordon reaches back in history for an image of the hero. Jim recognizes the historical identity of the ghost, the son of Irish John Lewis, a famous soldier and

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<sup>10</sup> Rose Anne Fraistat writes: "Gordon often relies on exaggerated and distorted perception to suggest the importance of [intuited realities such as a larger awareness of the physical world, compounded by intuitions of an eternal order governing both nature and human society]: flashbacks are sometimes hallucinatory; dreams are treated as facts, given much the same stature as Jung would bestow on them; and the imaginations of the protagonists often grant them fanciful or grotesque, but nonetheless true, images of reality" (99). Squires notes that as Gordon's novels shift from the historical hero to the modern hero, her "concern shifts from objective realism toward subjective hallucination" (105).

settler; he knows that Lewis is the ancestor of Catherine. Yet in contrast to a woman "on the lookout for heroes," Jim fails to recognize the heroic quality embodied in the ghost.

Jim attempts to dissuade Lewis from settling the land. Presuming the ability to reverse the progress of time, he tells the ghost, "The land is cursed. It is an old land, ruled by a goddess whose limbs were weary with turning before ever Ireland rose from the sea. An ancient goddess whom men have wakened from an evil dream" (308). Jim sustains his warning with descriptions of modern technological demons and nature's outrage at being overtaken by human building, but his voice becomes "a thin, minatory shriek," betraying his own entrapment in the labyrinthine structure of his intellect: "I tell you this tree, whose boughs, gleaming, led you to this stream, felled, its heart reft out, will have a voice, will utter cries louder than any you can utter. Cleena . . . Cleena, he will not listen!" (309). Cleena is a "Gaelic goddess 'who created the delusion of a land of perpetual youth, a utopia' for those moving westward" (Cheney 9). Utterly dismayed by the ghost's heedlessness of reason, Jim expects the goddess to intimidate and overcome the settler, but the natural world she rules bows before the hero as the water which would have embraced Jim's suicidal urge makes way for Lewis:

The waves parted before the giant, striding limbs and rushed, moaning and gurgling, against the roots of the sycamore. He would reach the bank,



start up the path. There would be the great wind  
of his passing. He might turn his head. There  
would be the bold, shining stare of his eyes.  
(309)

Jim's reasonable stance pales in comparison to the bold stride of the epic hero, and also in comparison with Jim's former self: when he was a young man, it seemed to Molly Ware that he was "fitted for bold, decisive actions in which he would not stop to reckon the consequences. In her provincial ignorance she had been surprised when they had told her that he wrote books" (104). Jim's first and only book was a history of Venice; he sacrificed four years to grasp the heroic founding of a beautiful city. Writing the book was itself a heroic accomplishment but now, having lost his scholarly voice and his propensity for "bold, decisive actions," he mistakes heroism for futility. At this point, he resembles Eph Cotter, who would do nothing rather than reach for something that might exceed his grasp. Yet his encounter with the ghost of Lewis, who emerged from the ancestral realm of his wife, works upon Jim's consciousness.

Louise Cowan's studies of Gordon's work establish its epic nature which foregrounds Jim's heroics in relation to the feminine. One of the paradoxes of epic action is the hero's ambivalent relation to the feminine within a larger framework that upholds marriage as an institution. As Aeneas moves to found Rome, he leaves behind his wife Creusa and his lover Dido, whose lamentation haunts his epic journey.

Yet as the critic points out, in epic action the larger guiding principle is feminine: Aeneas's journey accomplishes the will of Juno. The domestic life (and with it mortal women) is set aside for the action of the hero ("Aleck Maury" 7). Yet The Women on the Porch portrays a different configuration among goddess, hero, and mortal woman: Jim Chapman re-aligns his loyalty from muse-like goddess to mortal woman in his reconciliation with Catherine and his resolve to return home (resembling Odysseus as opposed to Aeneas). Gordon also makes an epic reversal as the goddess Cleena and all of nature bow before the godlike stride of the heroic mortal, Lewis.

The paradigm for Jim's realignment, his shift in attention from Edith, to the goddess Cleena, and finally to Catherine, is suggested in the Psyche myth, as Psyche's beauty diverts man's attention from the goddess to a mortal woman. As Cowan states, "an epic poet is always in search of an underlying myth that can account for the extraordinary behavior of the true hero, who is moved by forces he can neither comprehend nor control" ("Aleck Maury" 8). Indeed, Chapman's encounter with his wife's realm is beyond his comprehension; he becomes caught up in the momentum of the Psyche myth through his wife's enactment of Psyche's descent (which resembles the effect of Lena Grove's journey upon Byron Bunch and Gail Hightower). Moreover, without an understanding of the underlying myth, the hero's behavior is

difficult for readers to comprehend (which becomes apparent particularly at the end of this chapter).

The Psyche myth portrays an intimacy between mortal and divine that brings masculine godlikeness down to earth and raises the female and the earthly, an effect that Gordon also portrays in the novel. Lewis's epic action was settling the land, establishing a home for his descendants, encountering the feminine force of the earth. Squires calls attention to the names of the bordering estates, Swan Quarter and Oak Quarter, which recall "Leda and the female principle of life, and, by reason of the sacred oak groves at Dodona . . . Zeus and the male principle of life" (474). The places "once one in nature are now divided," Squires adds, a division that evokes Jim's separation from Catherine.

The reference alludes to Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," which suggests the precarious role of the mortal woman in relation to the epic action of the god Zeus. The scandal of rape is submerged in the enduring question:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak would let her drop?

While the poem cites Helen's conception, it promises the destruction of Troy and the death of Agamemnon who sacrificed his daughter and betrayed his wife. The poem focuses on the ambiguous reception of the mortal woman to the epic thrust of a god's power. It is clear that she "puts

on" his power, but does she put on his knowledge? That is, has the mortal woman become godlike, not only through the creative power of giving birth, but in wisdom as well?

Cowan writes that the significance of the epic lies in its *cosmopoesis*, the making of a cosmos, "a self-enclosed state of order which must be intuited" by the writer. It is an order "within which human life may be imagined in its various dimensions" (*Epic* 10). Jim Chapman, whose profession as a writer and historian is to make sense of events, receives a foretaste of what it means to understand the world as a cosmos, and of the sheer agony prerequisite to that knowledge:

I dreamed the other night that I had swallowed the globe, and the continents, angry at being imprisoned, churned and groaned, rubbing their shores against each other. The pain was so exquisite as to be indescribable. Like childbirth, probably. At any rate it carried its own anodyne, for I have not remembered the dream until this moment. (279)

Like the woman's dream of the splitting rails, this dream reflects Jim's encounter with mortal, female experience that seems necessary for his intellectual calling to make sense of the world. Like the pangs of childbirth, preparation for a new understanding of the world is afforded him only through the irrational medium of a dream. (The companion poem to "Leda and the Swan" is "The Second Coming.") Similarly, he himself does not enact the descent of Psyche; he encounters it through his wife and her ancestry. Jim's

extraordinary encounters and dreams suggest that he will come to see his intellectual work in light of his wife and his acknowledgement, if not an understanding, of the suffering particular to mortal women.

As he follows Catherine to Swan Quarter, he wonders about his mysterious attachment to her:

She was gone and since then he had been absent from himself. Was the sexual act surrounded with mystery because it was, in essence, magical? Did the woman who once truly received a man become the repository of his real being and thenceforward, witchlike, carry it with her wherever she went? (281)

Like Yeats's "Did she put on his knowledge with his power . . . ?" Jim's question is unanswerable, yet it draws him toward his wife as the locus of its answer. The permanence of their attachment stems from physical union yet carries a palpable yet immaterial meaning that lasts beyond their separation.

### **Emerging in Beauty**

Although Psyche's beauty occasions the realignment of men's attention from a goddess to a mortal woman, her physical beauty must be deepened through contact with death. Paralleling Psyche's growth in beauty, Catherine's transition from girlish goodness to crucial action pivots upon an understanding of beauty.

While Psyche must obtain underworldly beauty from Persephone, she has been warned not to luxuriate in Persephone's palace. Yet Catherine feels at home in Swan

Quarter, and is drawn to the natural world in a way that recalls her cousin Daphne's habit. Gathering vegetables in the garden, Catherine breaks the stalk of an onion: "She wiped the juice off on her rough apron, then held her hand up to her face and breathed in the rank odor, and thought: I am going to live in the country the rest of my life" (190). Though the "rank odor" suggests a pervasive, sinister quality of her work, Catherine resists this implication and imagines remaining forever:

If she were to marry Tom Manigault--and she was at the moment determined to marry him--her life would be very different from what it had been with Jim. They would live in the country. There would be the succession of country pleasures which so absorbed and delighted her. It is the life I was made for, she thought, the life I have always missed. (193)

Marriage with Tom would unite the two family estates and Catherine would become like Persephone, an underworldly queen luxuriating in that realm.

In the woods where Catherine meets Tom, she recovers a lost gift from her husband, a "round silver box" engraved with wheat and fruit, the emblems of Persephone. The box contains not money, as Tom suspects, but face powder, that Catherine calls her "complexion." Whereas money marks Psyche's passage to and from the underworld, Catherine has long since made her entrance, and is not about to leave it. She has yet to discover a beauty more than skin deep.

Another tryst in the woods with Tom, among the "dead leaves . . . down on the brown floor of this secret place,"

confirms the underworldly nature of their union and the superficial nature of her beauty (194). Lounging there, she makes a mental portrait of herself and Tom, a picture of a warrior with recumbent mistress, but she catches herself: "What is the matter with me . . . that I view this scene as if I were a beholder but not an actor?" (216). Her self-portrait emphasizes her desire to luxuriate in that realm and her inclination to observe rather than act; her portrait of a lady reveals her own passivity and stasis. Then she "drew a silver box out of her pocket and looked into the tiny mirror and powdered her face" (217). Her self-reflective gesture associates her visual beauty with the inability to act. Yet as she lingers in the deeper recesses of the underworld, she is bound to discover a deeper kind of beauty. For Hillman suggests:

Psyche must 'die' herself in order to experience the reality of this beauty, a death different from her suicidal attempts. This would be the ultimate task of soul-making and its beauty: the incorporation of destruction into the flesh and skin, embalmed in life, the visible transfigured by the invisibility of Hades kingdom, anointing the psyche by the killing experience of its personal mortality (Myth 102).

As her face powder emphasizes the superficial nature of her physical beauty, marriage with Tom offers an escape from her former life, not an engagement with the implications of death and dying at Swan Quarter.

Catherine soon discovers Tom's inability to love which is also linked to beauty. With a masklike grin he recounts

the moment in his childhood when he began to hate and defy his beautiful mother, Elsie. Catherine knows "it is no use to tell him that his mother is not one to awaken either love or hate. The enchantment fell too early and her features are the most glamorous that he will ever see and he will always be harking back to that brightest moment of danger" (220). His hatred captures that moment like a portrait, preserving his defiance and the perfect beauty of his mother.<sup>11</sup>

Tom's disillusionment with his mother's beauty is finally perceived by Catherine, whose realization was anticipated in the snatch of ironic "poetry" she playfully spoke from the mouth of her dog, Heros: "*Sometimes I roll in manure / just to increase my glamour.*" With comical exaggeration, Gordon makes the point that the descent into darkness and decay is necessary to deepen one's beauty. In contrast to Elsie Manigault's glamorous yet fading beauty, the beauty with which Psyche emerges from the underworld outlasts the blights of excrement and death. Even the

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<sup>11</sup> Stuckey claims that "Tom, ideally, is the kind of man Catherine ought, under other circumstances, to have married. He is physically powerful, capable of action" (72). Young, blond and handsome, he resembles the unrefined Eros who defies his mother and falls in love with Psyche. Even Jim Chapman notes Tom's powerful build, and supposes he would make a heroic warrior. When Eros is betrayed by Psyche, he returns to his mother, burning in love for Psyche, a purifying fire that urges him from Aphrodite's house in pursuit of Psyche. Yet Tom, who remains under his mother's roof as well as the power of her beauty, is captivated by defiance rather than by love, and therefore unable to love Catherine.



immortal Aphrodite can obtain this beauty only from the underworld.

Catherine's deadly encounter with her husband forces her to face mortality in a manner more intimate and dramatic than her comfortable sojourn among the dead. When Jim arrives at Swan Quarter toward the end of the novel, Catherine still longs for death. Stuckey writes that "For Miss Gordon, defeat and suffering are stoically accepted, we might almost say welcomed, as confirmation that the lot of man is inevitably tragic"; yet he fails to analyze the scene that enacts an important distinction from literary tragedy (136). Despite the tragic tone with which the novel begins and continues, Catherine turns the plot in a different direction that is comic in its traditional affirmation of marriage, and epic in the projection of what larger, intellectual tasks may be accomplished within that marriage.

Only hours before his transformative encounter with the ghost of Lewis, Jim attempts to strangle Catherine for her infidelity. When she announces her affair with Tom, Jim's angry hands encircle her neck. As Cowan writes, "His hands seem to have a life of their own, a fact indicating the almost total separation in him of body and spirit" ("Nature" 24). At that moment Jim embodies the problem of the modern intellectual; isolated by her words, he desires to see her face reflect the frightful loneliness of the "abyss into which her words have plunged him" (300). The deadly embrace

unites the two levels of plot, as well as the spouses; the double plots of the novel converge at this turning point.

As Jim strangles his wife, he observes that

she had given no sign of revulsion, of attempt to escape. Her eyes were closed. Her face, sharply uplifted to his, was as expressionless as a doll's, except for the slow, ugly widening of the mouth. She opened her eyes now and looked at him . . . he shook the slight body slowly from side to side, while his thumbs sinking deeper, seemed about to tear from the neck, like a coveted fruit, the rounded column of supporting muscles. (300-01)

Catherine has professed her guilt, and longs to die. She had not even attempted to justify her affair as a result of his own infidelity, and no longer imagines escaping into a new life.

The significance of Catherine's near-death is illuminated by a similar scene in Green Centuries, Gordon's preceding novel. As the dying Cassie, betrayed by her husband, emits one last cry, "The muscles on the side of her neck sprang out like cords. Her chin came up between them, the mouth above it a taut, open square" (444). Kathleen Henderson writes: "In this single image Cassie symbolizes the vulnerability and suffering of the feminine and of nature at the hands of the epic hero. . . . Her still, square mouth resembles a tragic mask, recalling both Jocasta and Cassandra, heroines who see, before the hero sees, an imminent destruction and are powerless to stay it" (285-86).

Like a tragic heroine, Catherine perceives imminent destruction, yet she demonstrates a significant departure

from the powerlessness of the tragic heroine. She does this in spite of the fact that her voice is cut off by her husband's deadly grip, leaving her unable to speak. Anne Boyle argues: "In Gordon's world, it is particularly difficult and perhaps unnatural for the female to achieve voice" (73).<sup>12</sup> Thus, Catherine must "achieve voice" without being able to use her voice. In Morrison's words, Catherine must find "another way," as Paul D expects of Sethe when faced with her children's return to slavery. Like Morrison, Gordon portrays feminine creativity being challenged by the threat of death and destruction.

When Catherine foresees not only her own death but her husband's destruction as well, she experiences a change of heart. To succumb to death would allow Jim to become a killer. Out of love for her husband, she finds a way to convey the imminent danger. As Jim continues to strangle her,

he became aware that somebody was tugging at his wrists, ineffectually but persistently. The hand fell away for a second, then began again its feeble plucking. The rhythm was suddenly broken by a new note. Fingers dug into the cords of his wrist, so sharply that he felt his pulse dulling under the pressure. 'Stop!' they seemed to say. 'There is something we must tell you.' (301)

The rhythm, note, and plucking gesture comprise music which

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<sup>12</sup>Alluding to both Cassie and Catherine, Boyle notes the "silencing" of women in Gordon's fiction, when "bestial screams arise from betrayed women, watery intakes of breath drown words and submerge characters in horrifying pools of experience" (73).

affects the flow of blood to Jim's heart, as if Catherine takes up the lyre Orpheus played to bring Eurydice out of Hades. In this manner, Catherine's hands achieve the voice to speak to her husband with a gesture: as Gordon writes, "One of those gestures more poignant than any spoken word" ("Cock-Crow" 562).

Yet is not enough to threaten Jim with death; here the context of the Psyche myth in The Golden Ass or The Metamorphoses helps illuminate Catherine's communication to Jim, suggesting a distinction between masculine and feminine ways of transformation. In Apuleius's novel, Psyche's tale is enveloped by the journey of Lucius who, in punishment, is changed into an ass. While Psyche is transformed by enduring the journey through the underworld, Lucius must embody his foolishness, for he has "made an ass of himself." For Jim, the threat of death is ineffectual; only the realization of his absurdity can alter his foolish course. As the strangling continues, and Catherine continues to pluck at Jim's wrists, he is:

like the man who, proceeding into the street even when a tugging at his coat sleeve indicates that it is not safe for crossing, will yet halt at the sudden, desperate tug that says 'You fool!' so, at the moment when the hand seemed about to fall away for the last time, he slowly relaxed his grip and, as she drew herself upright, staggering slightly, he raised his head and stared about the room, wonderingly, asking himself how he had come there and for what purpose. (301)

Catherine's final pluck convinces Jim of his foolishness,

disrupting his sense of purpose and jarring the historian into a state of wonder about his very place in the world.

Whereas Catherine's motivation stems from love, her effectiveness stems from her underworld experience. Unlike Miss Kit, Catherine engages the most unbearable aspect of the man she loves. Unlike Daphne, she finally resists the permanent escape from life offered by the underworld, or offered by death. Unlike Maria, amidst the psychic inner journey, she remains attentive to another. Thus, Catherine's sojourn at Swan Quarter has reflected to her the shallowness of her own beauty and the tragic outcome of weaknesses she shared with the women on the porch.

Catherine's musical gesture suggests the artful means of acting upon her new knowledge instead of relying upon girlish goodness and despairing of its failure. Hillman writes that the movement from girlishness to womanhood "means discovery of the psychic aspect in erotic perversions and in love's vicious hatreds and cruelties, and not mere reaction to them with innocence, resentment, and . . . tears" (83). Whereas innocence attracts Hades to Persephone, Catherine's infidelity distinguishes her from the underworld queen. (It also distinguishes her from the tragic Desdemona, whose innocence can not protect her from the deadly hands of her husband.) As Philip Weinstein writes of Morrison's fiction, the most artful sorts of survival begin on the other side of innocence. Having hated her husband, Catherine

seems finally to understand the loss of inspiration, the intellectual despair behind her husband's infidelity. She also comes to know her own crucial role in his intellectual life.

Though the Psyche myth ends in the affirmation of Psyche's union with Eros, the more immediate purpose of Psyche's descent is to retrieve a deeper kind of beauty. The deeper beauty of Gordon's version of the myth is demonstrated through the gesture that turns the course of the novel from its tragic direction. Catherine creates a response to her husband's paralyzing violence, creating a kind of music out of her refusal to succumb to helplessness or submit to a tragic fate for her husband and herself. Recalling Isabel's generosity of the lady, Catherine's hands demonstrate an active triumph over limitation.

Nearly morning after Jim's attempt to strangle her, Catherine sits alone on the porch. Fresh from his encounter with the ghost and a night of sleeping in the woods, Jim approaches Catherine in the pre-dawn darkness; she informs him that she has sent Tom away. Announcing her intention to make coffee, she requests Jim's assistance and they step toward the kitchen next to the house. Significantly, Jim accompanies Catherine off the porch, marking her distinction from the women on the porch.

The kitchen at Swan Quarter is significantly built apart from the house where underworldly shades gather. It is

a place set apart, where connections or transitions are made, like the shed where Sethe dispatches her daughter to the underworld for safekeeping, or the cold house where Beloved seduces Paul D and he rediscovers his red, red heart. Like Jim's first encounter with Agnes, that began his transition from scholar to husband, his reconciliation with Catherine occurs in a kitchen. The abruptness of his transitions suggests his need to maintain a balance between those two roles. Even Jim's seduction of Edith, his failed attempt to balance the intellectual life and his relation to women, began in a kitchen.

Enacting simple but significant rituals, Jim builds a fire in the stove and Catherine makes coffee, handing him a cup. Stuckey grants that cup the significance of wine, a drink of sacrifice, commitment and communion, yet he overlooks the transitional significance of the kitchen, interpreting Catherine's task as a return to "her domestic duties" (76). Rather than the *domus* or home, however, her task emphasizes the hearth that Jim brings to burn. According to Barbara Kirksey, the hearth is the place that demands "focusing," a movement of the soul in relation to its wounds:

It is not a journey to the underworld . . . Inherently more subtle, focusing is the slight movement toward and away from those burned-burning movements of soul. It is a way of 'finding place' for one's illnesses and wounds. . . . As part of the archetype of the journey home to the hearth, focusing is the experience of and connection to

Hestia, builder of the house, so that the soul may dream in peace. (111-112)

The house of Swan Quarter would keep Catherine there forever in a Stygian sleep, while the kitchen provides a place for her and Jim to readjust the focus of their disparate lives. In that kitchen, Catherine's new maturity is revealed as she warms her hands by the hearth: "They were no longer the hands of a young girl, but of a frail woman, hovering for warmth over unseen, imprisoned flames" (313). Thus Gordon emphasizes the subtle yet vital strength of the hands that altered Jim's deadly course, demonstrating Catherine's attainment of a beauty that would survive the underworld.

Moreover, the stimulation of coffee suggests resistance to the Stygian sleep that overcomes Psyche on the threshold of the underworld when she has opened the container of beauty. That resistance is crucial for Catherine; she has gained the threshold of the underworld as well as underworldly beauty but has yet to emerge into the light of day. Jim still wonders about his place and purpose; blind to Catherine's precarious position and overcome with his own "deathly weariness," he makes the counterproductive suggestion that she return to the house to go to bed (313).

Yet suddenly, Miss Willy returns home from the horse show which has taken her away from Swan Quarter. As Catherine is horrified to discover, the beloved stallion is dead. Overcome with grief and compassion, Catherine suggests



that her aunt go to bed. Yet Willy forces the "outline of a smile" as she dispassionately describes the accident, and states abstractly: "I'll just go and feed the chickens. . . . We'll bury him, as soon as it's light" (315). Willy's morning chore and detached manner recall the blank-faced emptiness of psyche in the portrait of great-aunt Amanda feeding chickens. Willy's tentative place on the porch now seems secured. Besides losing the horse, she has found herself paralyzed by superficial expectations of a lady: fearful of disapproval from a disappearing family, she rejected the courtship of Mr. Shannon, the humble horse trainer.

As Catherine sits on the kitchen table, her hands covering her face, she too resembles the facelessness of the ancestral portrait. Succumbing to compassion and despair, she would remain with Willy at Swan Quarter. Yet as Jim stands in the kitchen doorway, he watches a snake slither through the grass, a movement that recalls the lower pattern of the novel winding "serpentwise" through the upper pattern. The mythical realm has wound its way into his historical consciousness, and now he recognizes Catherine's danger of succumbing to the sleep of the underworld. Having witnessed the heroic movement of Lewis, Jim revives his bold decisiveness.

When Jim hears Catherine's slipper fall to the kitchen floor, he turns toward her:

he stooped and was about to slide it back on her foot, when, still holding it in his hand, he bent lower and set his lips on her bare instep.

'Come,' he said and heard all the echoes stir in the sleeping house. 'We will bury him, as soon as it's light. Then we must go.' (316)

Makowsky reads Jim's statement as a declaration "to the silent and subdued Catherine" that he would "bury the past and go on to the future" (161). She claims that Gordon, as she is supposed to have done in her own life, "seems to be blaming the victim, inadequate Catherine" for Jim's infidelity and violence. Catherine's implied departure with Jim is the "seemingly bizarre decision" that "announces the increasingly diminished stature of women in Gordon's fiction" (160). Yet it is the critic's misinterpretation that diminishes Catherine's accomplishment and the impact of her underworld journey upon Jim.

By repeating Willy's words Jim underscores her suggestion to bury the horse, yet he significantly alters his previous plan to return to the "sleeping" house. Now that he recognizes the danger of remaining in this realm, he states the imperative of immediate departure from Swan Quarter. He has also altered his relation to the feminine: in contrast to his former appeal to the goddess Cleena, Jim now bows before the mortal woman, acknowledging her new beauty. The journey has been necessary for both Catherine and Jim, but to allow the psyche to linger is to lose her to death. Eros-like, he brings her away from the threshold of

the underworld once she has been overwhelmed. Thus he reciprocates her rescue of him from the abyss of loneliness and despair.

Thus Psyche's myth sheds light on Catherine's underworld journey as a physical descent as well as an interior journey of psyche. Catherine is tempted to remain, to escape from the pain of betrayal into the luxury of the familial, even incestuous inward turn that approximates death because it is severed from responsible action. Yet she discovers a beauty that is stronger than death: not a girlish goodness that merely accomplishes what is expected; nor a sympathetic acquiescence to the suffering of others or to a tragic fate of her own, but an imaginative response, the gesture that communicates even without speech the urgency of life and jars her husband from his misguided pursuits.

The significance of Psyche's descent, though undertaken alone, extends beyond the individual to engage the modern mind; Jim will incorporate the ordeal of the mortal woman and the subtle strength of her frail hands into his intellectual work. At the novel's end Jim and Catherine are bound to emerge together from the underworld, bringing the depth of their experience into the world. Gordon's novel projects the modern intellectual toward a future that recognizes the deeper beauty with which the American woman emerges from the underworld descent.

### **Chapter III. William Faulkner's Light in August: The Divided Psyche and the Longing for Darkness**

Whereas Caroline Gordon's novel offers a relatively straightforward version of the Psyche myth, dramatizing the separation and reunion of Psyche and Eros in marriage, William Faulkner distorts the myth, dividing Psyche's role between the two protagonists of Light in August, Lena Grove and Joe Christmas. Psyche's abandonment by Eros and her determination to set out, expecting his child, in search of him, is evoked by Lena Grove at the very beginning of the novel, yet she bypasses the descent to the underworld; Psyche's arduous descent is instead suffered by Joe Christmas.

Faulkner divides Psyche's journey toward wholeness to reflect the difficulty of achieving unity amidst the proliferation of division. He also withholds traditional means of unification--storytelling and marriage--from the end of the novel. As a result, two more tenuous but deeper means of wholeness emerge in the course of the novel: Lena Grove's light in August, her gift of wholeness, of being able to "assume everything," and Joe Christmas's "longing for darkness," his wholeness arduously earned through his own descent.

As Lena evokes Psyche's urge toward wholeness, with a force comparable to Faulkner's art of fiction, she moves the novel in the direction of wholeness. She becomes even

Eros-like, drawing others out of the underworld. In contrast, Joe's equal and opposite urge manifests the barriers to wholeness as he severs Joanna Burden's head from her body, a split that encompasses the novel's other divisions.

Lena Grove's exemption from descent and Joe Christmas's resistance to descent are illuminated by the mythical import of coins, which occasion Psyche's initiation into the underworld. When Lena receives coins from one of the hopeless women who hoard them, she spends the money, exchanging the prevailing portrait of defeated womanhood for the momentum of the "lady travelling," who moves through the world in union of body and soul. Joe Christmas attempts to purchase immunity from the sullyng experience of the underworld, while Gail Hightower, deluded like Joe by a "purchased immunity," resists emergence from the underworld.

Though Lena bypasses the descent, she evokes Psyche's final union with Eros and the birth of Joy. Lena's ability to "assume" the darkness of matter into her light parallels Joe Christmas's "longing for darkness," for what is alternately female and black. Though his embodiment of societal resistance veils the healing aspects of that darkness, the blackness central to America's myth of race becomes an image of wholeness longed for amidst the divisions of the novel.

### **Division and the Wholeness of Story**

The dynamic between the holistic nature of storytelling and the persistent separation that divides Lena Grove from Joe Christmas is suggested early in the novel, when Byron Bunch tells Reverend Gail Hightower of his encounter with Lena Grove (Chapter Four). As readers have always noted, Lena and Joe never meet, yet the nature of storytelling begins to bridge their separation, in both Byron's telling and in the entirety of Faulkner's novel. The novel reveals, however, the limitations and even diabolical capacities of the spoken word: by the novel's end, Lena's and Joe's separate stories defy the capacity of spoken word to render a complete story. Nevertheless, the novel, with its attention to the Psyche myth, creates a wholeness out of separation. As Lena and Joe each represent a segment of Psyche's journey, their stories told together reflect the wholeness of the Psyche myth.

When Hightower listens to Byron's story, he has never heard of either Lena, who has just arrived in Jefferson, or Joe who, having lived in town three years, has just been indicted for killing Joanna Burden. Byron Bunch, who works on Saturdays to protect himself from trouble, tells Hightower the unconsciously humorous story of falling in love with a pregnant woman who enters the sawmill looking for her lost love, Lucas Burch. In spite of Byron's love for his subject, which becomes increasingly evident as he speaks

of Lena, he cannot evade the compelling plot of Joe Christmas, reflecting Faulkner's own telling of Lena's story: the author cannot render a portrait of Lena without portraying the descent of Joe Christmas.

What began Lena's journey was Lucas's lie, a promise of wholeness followed by urgent separation: he would find employment, set up a home, and send word for her. Following word of mouth, she searches for Lucas Burch, who has betrayed her, yet finds her way to Byron Bunch. Exemplifying her faith, she is not concerned with the letter of the word but with the spirit. In spirit, she finds exactly what she is looking for: a hardworking bachelor who uncannily seems to be waiting for her. And in Byron's speech she finds Lucas Burch: though Lucas has changed his name to Joe Brown, she recognizes him in Byron's description. Thus Lena begins to demonstrate the triumph of unity over separation.

When Byron realizes that he has revealed Lena's lost love, "he could have bitten his tongue in two" (56). The fiction of the spoken word may represent a truth that emerges despite the teller's intention. The image of Byron's severed tongue emphasizes the tension between wholeness and separation throughout the novel, as well as the divisions and unities at stake in storytelling. The image also portends Byron's later insight into the peculiar nature of Lena's relationship to Lucas and her interiorization of the novel's divisions:

It's like she was in two parts, and one of them knows that he is a scoundrel. But the other part believes that when a man and a woman are going to have a child, that the Lord will see to it that they are all together when the right time comes. Like it was God that looks after women, to protect them from men. And if the Lord dont see fit to let them two parts meet and kind of compare, then I aint going to do it either. (302)

In love with Lena, Byron is torn between his ability to reunite the couple and to keep them separate, reflecting an almost godlike power in the teller's stance. Byron's tongue remains whole, however, and his storytelling brings Lena closer to Lucas. If Byron's tongue stands as a metaphor for storytelling, one might almost say that it swallows Byron up, making him enter the story as a participant, no longer framing the tale from the outside. Predicating the end of the novel, Byron begins to enter Lena's fiction.

The placid hopefulness of Lena's journey would seem at odds with the tortured despair of Joe Christmas's plot, yet the novel demonstrates the unitive capacity of storytelling. In Byron's tale as in Faulkner's entire novel, the inseparability of Lena and Joe seems characteristic of storytelling itself, as if the purpose of story were the union of disparities. Hillman suggests that stories help one to organize "events into meaningful experiences. The stories are means of telling oneself into events that might not otherwise make psychological sense at all," even images that are "obscene, grotesque and cruel" (Loose Ends 1). The novel reveals more than one character who tells himself into :



events, first Byron telling himself into Lena's tale, and finally the furniture dealer telling himself (and his wife) into Lena's story. Yet, as suggested by the end of the novel, some stories make no sense, psychologically or otherwise; Joe Christmas's story, within the bounds of the novel, stops short of making sense. At first, listening to Byron's telling of Lena's and Joe's inseparable stories, Hightower protests, "But I dont see any connection between-- [Lena and Joe]" (78). By the end of the novel, however, Hightower progresses from listener to participant as he becomes engaged in both the birth of Lena's son and the death of Joe Christmas. Drawn out of his underworldly existence by Byron's story, Hightower dramatizes the active participation required for the transition from separation to unity.

As in Gordon's final pair of novels, envisioned as two necessary parts of a whole, the entire action of Faulkner's novel occupies two distinct levels. Lena's journey occupies the upper pattern that corresponds to A Narrow Heart: The Portrait of a Woman. Joe Christmas follows the lower pattern represented by The Glory of Hera that plots Herakles's journey through the underworld. Gordon's pairing of the novels exemplifies her vision that the portrait of a woman must be accompanied by an underworld journey.

Faulkner reflects Gordon's vision to a further extreme, as he boldly yokes the two levels of plot into the space and

time of one novel. In Victor Strandberg's words, Light in August is "a split-level novel, with a Lena Grove . . . serenely inhabiting the upper sunlit level while Joe Christmas . . . sink[s] terminally into nether darkness" (92). The brilliance of Lena's light cannot be described without Joe's descent into darkness.

In like manner, two stories coexist in Faulkner's The Wild Palms. The double plot emerges from the necessity of telling one tale, the novelist explains:

To tell the story I wanted to tell, which was the one of the intern and the woman who gave up her family and husband to run off with him. To tell it like that, somehow or another I had to discover a counterpoint for it, so I invented the other story, its complete antithesis, to use as counterpoint. . . . I imagine as a musician would do to compose a piece of music in which he needed a balance, a counterpoint. (Meriwether 132)

The antithesis, he explains "is the story of a man who got his love and spent the rest of the book fleeing from it, even to the extent of voluntarily going back to jail where he would be safe. They are only two stories by chance, perhaps necessity. The story is that of Charlotte and Wilbourne" (Meriwether 247-48). Two parts create an effect of richness that cannot be achieved by one note alone.

Likewise, Byron Bunch's devoted, unrequited pursuit of Lena contrasts the flight of Lucas Burch, who fathers Lena's child and flees twice from her, even at the risk of losing the thousand-dollar reward for the capture of Joe Christmas. Moreover, Lena's surface tale of calm completeness cannot be

told without the counterpoint of Joe Christmas's anxiety-ridden plot. The comic nature of Lena's plot rests upon the underlying movement of Joe Christmas's tragedy, reflecting the salvation that rests upon crucifixion.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in order to depict Lena, a portrait achieved with a minimum of strokes, Faulkner must elaborate the underworld, even if that descent is suffered by someone else. That Joe suffers so arduously for the image of wholeness he embodies only at the moment of death emphasizes the gift by which Lena is exempt from descent.

Faulkner's division of Psyche's journey toward wholeness along the lines of race and gender, Lena as a white woman, Joe as a supposedly black man, suggests that those two ideas delay the achievement of wholeness. Joe Christmas, who internalizes the disgust for both the black and the female, is blind to the positive aspects of darkness. In effect, he is divided from Lena's wholeness by the consequences of ideas attached to race and gender.

Critics note that division, particularly as tied to race, stands in the way of the journey toward wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Darrel Abel discusses the coexistence of Joe's tragic plot and Lena's comic plot. Michael Millgate writes that Lena "provides a steady imperturbable groundnote, an onward linear progression that offers a constant contrast to the desperate contortions--moral, emotional, and physical--of the other characters." Yet he finds that Lena is less a character who develops, and more "a kind of impersonalized catalytic force, effecting change but itself unchanging," an argument that diminishes the furniture dealer's insight into the development of Lena's design (126).

Eric Sundquist's study of race in Faulkner's work suggests racial conflict is what disrupts the possibility of wholeness usually offered in both the image of marriage and the psychology of story.<sup>2</sup> James Snead finds that division is maintained by rhetoric that stems from "the 'purity' notion that seems the requirement for white supremacist logic," a notion that Faulkner's narratives strive against (xiii).<sup>3</sup> The action of the novel along Psyche's path destroys the attachment to purity.

Judith Bryant Wittenberg also discusses the divisive nature of speech: "As Light in August reveals, the letter indeed killeth, the murderous wordsymbols having provided the classification that Joe disastrously struggles with and

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<sup>2</sup>Sundquist writes that racial conflict is particularly manifested in sexual violence. In Light in August, the "crisis of blood. . . . derives its power from collision, penetration and withdrawal rather than from the dramatic marriage of opposing forces that Faulkner would strive for in Quentin's and Shreve's imaginative reconstructions [in the later novel, Absalom, Absalom!]. Both the action and the form of Light in August answer violence with violence, tearing away from each other lives and stories as they threaten to become joined. At a psychological level they do indeed blur into each other; but at a narrative level that responds to the deepest need of that psychology, they remain vivid and powerless in their segregation." (91)

<sup>3</sup>One characteristic of this rhetoric is that "the fear of merging, or loss of identity through synergistic union with the other, leads to the wish to use racial purification as a separating strategy against difference" (x). "Figures of division" fail because "absolute segregation, in trying to enforce an unreal polarity, only further agitates the psychic desire to exceed its artificial boundaries" (xii). Faulkner reconstructs and then dismantles the rhetoric of division, while some of his characters struggle to reverse that separation (xiv).

that serves as the rationale for his inhuman treatment by others" (167).<sup>4</sup> In contrast to the fatal rhetoric in the novel, Lena's evades "the letter." Unconcerned with the discrepancy between the names Lucas Burch and Byron Bunch as she approaches Jefferson, her journey is a reinterpretation of Lucas's lie. More significant than Lucas himself is the wholeness of family she anticipated when she set out looking for him. Lena Grove's ability to make Lucas's lie into a fiction prefigures Faulkner's art of creating wholeness from division.

Included in Byron's telling of Lena and Joe is the death of Joanna Burden, whose corpse embodies Faulkner's characterization of the modern split between mind and body, spirit and matter. When a stranger enters her burning house, he finds that "Her head had been cut pretty near off, a lady with the beginning of gray hair" (92). Wrapping her in a bedspread and carrying her outside the house completes the severance:

she was laying on her side, facing one way, and her head was turned clean around like she was looking behind her. And he said how if she could just have done that when she was alive she might not have been doing it now. (92)

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<sup>4</sup>Wittenberg refers to a study by Lucius Outlaw that states: "During the nineteenth century, race came to signify biologically distinguished groups, its use having been generated by the association of the color black with evil, death, and Christian sin" among other things (150). It is this kind of association that leads to Joe Christmas's inability to recognize the positive side of his "longing for darkness."

The stranger's irony emphasizes the need for precaution, perhaps a vigilant reading of the past indicated by Joanna's reverted head. Yet this reversion also seemed fixed during her life, as she was overburdened by the past. Whereas Joanna's body bears the burden of history, Lena moves hopefully toward the future. A procession accompanying Joanna Burden's body into town is:

held up momentarily at a street intersection near the square by a country wagon which had stopped to let a passenger descend. Looking out, the sheriff saw a young woman climbing slowly and carefully down from the wagon, with that careful awkwardness of advanced pregnancy. (294)

Arresting the movement of the split corpse, Lena, whose body holds the immediate promise of new life, travels in unity of body and mind, spirit and matter. Awkwardly burdened with new life, Lena leads toward a new place to begin.

The persistent delay in Lena's marriage throughout the novel reflects the elusive nature of unity in the world of Faulkner's novel. When Byron speaks of Reverend Hightower, Lena voices the anticipation which inspires the momentum of the novel: "Is he still enough of a preacher to marry folks?" (88). Yet her expected marriage to Lucas Burch never occurs, nor does her probable marriage to Byron take place within the novel. In contrast to Isabel Archer and Catherine Chapman, whose absent children bring marriage to the forefront of their parallels to Psyche, Lena's delayed marriage highlights the child. Like Psyche's daughter Joy,

Lena's child is an important image of unity within a county divided by race. Noting that Lucas Burch, the child's father, is described as "dark complected," Snead suggests that Lena's child (in contrast to crucial assumptions about Joe Christmas) is of mixed descent (93). The inconclusive and speculative nature of this union of societal opposites testifies to Faulkner's dual vision of wholeness and its obstruction in crisis-ridden America.

### **The Psyche Urge**

From Byron's would-be split tongue to Joanna's divided corpse, painful splits and bifurcations appear throughout the novel. Within that divided world that includes her own loss, however, Lena urges the novel toward wholeness. Since the moment of her conception in Faulkner's mind, Lena epitomizes the "Psyche urge, the desire in spite of hurt to find her lost love" (Cowan, Preface xi).<sup>5</sup> As Psyche searches for Eros in spite of the descent she must make, Lena searches for Lucas in spite of his betrayal. Both women make forgiveness integral to their journey. Moreover, Lena persists in following that urge from the beginning through the end of the novel.

Faulkner maintained that he began Light in August "knowing no more about it than a young woman, pregnant,

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<sup>5</sup>Louise Cowan applies this term and definition to Catherine Chapman of The Women on the Porch.

walking along a strange country road" (Millgate 132).<sup>6</sup> The novelist explained:

that story began with Lena Grove, the idea of the young girl with nothing, pregnant, determined to find her sweetheart. It was--that was out of my admiration for women, for the courage and endurance of women. As I told that story I had to get more and more into it, but that was mainly the story of Lena Grove. (Faulkner at the University 74)

Lena resembles Psyche, abandoned by Eros, wandering the earth in search of him, carrying his child. To "get more and more into it," Faulkner explores the underworld journey of Joe Christmas, the descent imperative to the portrayal of a soul. Whereas Lena enacts Psyche's longing for her lost love, carrying the life and hope of the novel, Joe is relegated to the underworld, not only visiting the realm of the dead but experiencing death himself.

Reading Light in August is an ordeal: the reader has far more share in Joe Christmas's descent than in Lena's evasion of the underworld journey.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is what contributes to the exasperation of some critics who find

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<sup>6</sup>Cited from an introduction to The Sound and the Fury.

<sup>7</sup> Two critics in particular suggest that to read the novel is to experience racism to a varying degree. James Snead writes: "The tragic realization of these novels may be that a kind of semiotic discrimination is as necessary to reading as it is, deplorably, for the whites of Jefferson, Mississippi" (82). Philip Weinstein writes "To read the book is to descend into and exit out of stances that are not so much true or false as partial. It is to undergo, through exposure to those whose single-mindedness nothing can surprise or alter, an education in racism" (172).



that Lena is mindless and insensitive.<sup>8</sup> Other critics, however, laud Lena's creative power, not only as a mother but as a fiction maker who creates a story out of her loss.<sup>9</sup>

Lena's shape reveals both the presence of a child and the loss of her lover, that loss which propels her movement through the novel. Loss, a theme often discussed by Faulkner

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<sup>8</sup> Ellen Douglass writes of Lena Grove: "Although evidence is overwhelming, it never penetrates her thick skull that the father she seeks for her child, even if she found him, would be worse than no father at all. Quaintly and good-naturedly and invincibly stupidly she gains from her travels not the least notion of where she is or how far one place is from another" (156-57). Carolyn Porter argues that Lena's "bovine imperviousness to the tragic events among which her body moves around with such enviable impunity" demonstrates her inability to practice free will or to impose order upon time (258). Yet Deborah Clarke looks on the feminist side of evasion in Faulkner: "His women characters evade the boundaries and categories by which the men attempt to control them" (93). For Clarke, that ability demonstrates a positive creativity.

<sup>9</sup> Feminist critics are quick to point out likenesses between Lena's creativity and Faulkner's. Clarke links Lena's creativity to Faulkner's. Diane Roberts suggests that Lena's wandering in open expression of her desire allows her a positive feminine creativity (173, 185). Wittenberg notes that a number of women in Faulkner's work "have distinctive voices capable of 'authoring' the past and affecting others" ("A Feminist Consideration" 244). Though Lena is not included in the critic's list, her fictionalization of the Psyche urge secures her place as an author, if not of the past, then of the future. Minrose Gwin writes that Lena Grove, like Joanna Burden, is "a female subject propelled by loss and desire." Between these two characters, "each both disruptive and productive, we feel the force of Faulkner's narrative desire in constant process and motion" (27). Thus, Lena portrays the dynamic between loss and desire that drives Faulkner to create fiction.

critics, is inherent in Faulkner's drive to write fiction.<sup>10</sup> As John Matthews observes, "the first gesture of Faulkner's narrative is commonly to measure a loss, to inscribe absence" (60).<sup>11</sup> For Faulkner, the novel form serves both to express a longing and to attempt recovery of what is lost. Thus, propelled by the Psyche urge to recover her loss, Lena embodies the same creative desire that impels the author to recover a loss by writing fiction.

In spite of arguments that Lena lacks development, as she moves "forever without progress," her transformation of loss into fiction indicates what she has learned from her original search for Lucas.<sup>12</sup> As the dealer concludes:

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<sup>10</sup> Gail Mortimer states that loss in Faulkner's work stems from a Manichean split between mind and body. She writes that "Lena is a foil for Joe . . . the archetypal female, the serene woman, at home with nature, with the earth, with birth, with her own physical self, with the mysterious source of life" (17). Thus, the loss of unity between mind and body, like that between man and woman, parallels Lena's separation from her lost love.

<sup>11</sup> Matthews discusses Faulkner's claim that when he wrote The Sound and the Fury, he "had no plan at all . . . [he] just began to write." Faulkner's statement "reflects an initial forgetfulness of the world to be represented, a loss redeemed (and then incompletely) only in the text's created world," Matthews claims (9). The text overall, then, suggests a yearning for redemption. Faulkner readers know that writing that novel was an attempt to recapture his vision of a girl in a tree with muddy drawers; in the novel, each brother tries to recapture the feeling of the loss of their sister.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Moreland makes a relevant distinction between Freud's idea of compulsive repetition and "revisionary repetition" which "repeats some structured event, in order somehow to alter that structure and its continuing power,

I think she was just travelling. I dont think she had any idea of finding whoever it was she was following. . . . I think she had just made up her mind to travel a little further and see as much as she could, since I reckon she knew that when she settled down this time, it would likely be for the rest of her life. (506)

More than "just travelling," Lena prolongs the Psyche urge beyond its original end (to find Lucas Burch). Whereas Psyche betrayed Eros, Lena is betrayed by Lucas, a point that emphasizes Lena's forgiveness over Psyche's. By utilizing that mythical urge for her own design, Lena transforms Lucas's lie into a fiction, one that inspires the participation of others.<sup>13</sup> By extending her gift, she becomes Eros-like; like him she bypasses the underworld descent, yet brings others, Byron and Hightower, into upperworldly

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especially by opening a critical space for what the subject might learn about that structure" (Faulkner's Modernism 4). Lena thus repeats the search for Lucas in a way which re-envisions the journey as a path of learning, allowing her to grow in wisdom.

<sup>13</sup> Referring to Margaret Homans' categories that divide discourse into women's literal (practical) and men's figurative (intellectual) tendencies, Clarke states that this division pervades the novel, claiming that Faulkner "questions this split and the judgment it implies" (94). Division is illustrated further in Faulkner's treatment of Lena Grove and Joanna Burden that separates sexuality from procreation (101). However, Lena's "creative maternal power is both" figurative and literal; most importantly, her fiction-making ability grounds the figurative in the literal (94). Yet when Clarke concludes that Lena's fictional quest is merely a "postponing of the inevitable" "humdrum" life that "undermine[s] Lena's strength and any lasting victory," the critic undermines her own insight into Lena's imaginative ability to make ordinary circumstances interesting (103,102).

existence. Thus, the impression of Lena's wholeness is formed by her ability to evoke both Psyche and Eros as she moves through the novel.

Sergei Chakovsky, discussing the dynamic between loss and recovery, suggests that Faulkner's depiction of love and the human condition echoes Aristophanes' words in Plato's Symposium:

we are like pieces of the coins that children break in half for keep sakes--making two out of one, like the flatfish--and each of us forever seeking the half that will tally with himself. . . . And all this to do is a relic of that original state of ours, when we were whole, and now, when we are longing for and follow after that primeval wholeness, we say we are in love. (73)

Chakovsky concludes that "Faulkner's artistic strategy" in writing about women is to portray "her original lost oneness" with men (79). The desire to recover that "lost oneness" as she follows "that primeval wholeness" is what impels Lena's journey, yet Joe's journey is fueled by the question of his origin. Because he has no oneness to lose, and find again, he must create his own.

Henry Armstid, one of the strangers inspired to care for Lena, gives his own version of Plato's theory: "You just let one of them get married or get into trouble without being married, and right then and there is where she secedes from the woman race and species and spends the balance of her life trying to get joined up with the man race" (14-15). Indeed, Lena spends the balance of the novel in pursuit of

Lucas, which represents the pursuit of wholeness. Yet in contrast to Lena, the novel is populated with women who are too much a part of "the man race": Mrs. Armstid, whose face resembles that of a defeated general; Mrs. McEachern, who seems as if "she saw or heard through a more immediate manshape or manvoice" (148); Mrs. Beard and Bobbie Allen, with their manly names; Joanna Burden, who surrenders to rape like a man.

Chakovsky further suggests that the idea of "'oneness' in spirit is paradoxically implied in the ambiguous 'sex differentiation' and finds its ultimate artistic expression in the reversal of the traditionally male and female parts in the novel" (74). His statement applies to James and Gordon: the men's tea that opens The Portrait of a Lady and the men on the porch in the beginning of The Women on the Porch suggest a longing for wholeness characteristic of modern American novels. With these reversals, the novels posit the idea of oneness from which to illustrate a separation and explore a means by which the American protagonist attempts to regain it. Yet for Faulkner, the relation between genders is not simply role reversal: the women seem overwrought by masculinity. The momentum of Lena's exceptional pursuit of Lucas carries her against the current of unchecked masculinity that overwhelms the other women in the novel.

As Gordon shows through Catherine's intimacy with her cousin, and as Faulkner exemplifies through Hightower, it is tempting, having arrived in the underworld, to luxuriate in its separation from the world and remain forever. Yet the underworld is also, one must recall, the realm of the imagination, and Lena suggests her grasp of the very underworld she evades by making loss into fiction.

Inasmuch as Lena's exemption depends upon Joe's descent, the possibility of his descent depends upon Lena as a still point for Faulkner's imagination. Each of the novelists in this study conducts an exploration of the underworld, a sustained look into the abyss, yet as Paul D understands, Sethe would not risk going there without some one to hold her ankles, as he phrases it, and pull her back out. In this way, Lena, whole and complete, fulfills Eros's role for both characters and author, and by extension, the reader. If the force of Lena's Psyche urge can transform Lucas's lie into fiction, then Faulkner might reveal not only the horror of the "wordsymbol," but he might transform the suggestion of Joe's black blood into an elaborate fiction that explores not only the depths of the human psyche but of the American literary imagination.

The description of Joe Christmas's face associates him with death: "His face was gaunt, the flesh a level dead parchment color. Not the skin: the flesh itself, as though the skull had been molded in a still and deadly regularity

and then baked in a fierce oven" (34-35). The parchment color suggests Joe's journey as an underworld text.<sup>14</sup> As Psyche's descent is undertaken to discover a beauty more than "skin deep," the underworld seems permanently embalmed in Joe.

Opposite Lena's Psyche urge, transformed into fiction, is Joe's urge that leads to Joanna's decapitation. Prior to that event, Lucas Burch, renamed Joe Brown, portrays with Joe an aspect of the Psyche myth. Brown is described as the man Joe Christmas "had taken for a partner." The Sheriff declares during a discussion of Joe Brown: "I aint interested in the wives he left in Alabama, or anywhere else. What I am interested in is the husband he seems to have had since he come to Jefferson" (321). Joe Christmas, as "husband" of Brown, seems to replace Lena Grove as his "wife." Living together in a small cabin, Christmas and Brown represent a version of Psyche's plan to decapitate Eros, exacerbated by Joe's fraught associations with women and blackness, when Brown speaks of Joe's association with Joanna as well as Joe's confession of having "black blood." Christmas's reaction is, in denial of the black or the female, to shut him up: "Beneath Christmas's hand he began to make a choked, gurgling noise, struggling. . . . 'Take your black hand off of me, you damn niggerblooded--'" (103).

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<sup>14</sup> Virginia Hlavsa maintains that parchment, which is made from goat skin, alludes Joe's underworldly realm.

Looking at Brown, Christmas thinks, "*Something is going to happen to me. I am going to do something.*" Within arm's reach of a razor, he contemplates cutting Brown's throat, but something tells him: "*This is not the right one.*" As Joe subsequently beheads Joanna, Faulkner emphasizes not only Joe's urge to divide the head from the body but that the division is particularly visited upon a woman.

Moments later Christmas reveals the sleeping Brown:

Christmas lifted the match and looked at Brown. Brown lay on his back, sprawled, one arm dangling to the floor. His mouth was open. While Christmas watched, he began to snore. (104-05)

Brown is an inverted caricature of what Psyche saw the night she shone the lamp upon the sleeping Eros, prepared with her knife to decapitate her supposedly monstrous husband. Upon this moment of betrayal, the luminous god of love is revealed, Psyche's desire deepens, and her search for him begins, that search evoked by Lena from the inception of the novel. Yet here, the light shines on Lena's betrayer.

Faulkner's mythical allusion suggests that in the absence of Eros, the absence of love, the Psyche urge remains the urge to kill, whereas Psyche's plan to decapitate Eros is altered by her recognition of the god of love. Whereas Psyche's urge propels her toward the wholeness signified in marriage with Eros, Joe's pairings with Joanna and Joe Brown (their names repetitions of his own) only replicate the divided self.



Following his deadly urge Christmas walks at night, resembling the drowning corpse in the underworld who begs for Psyche's assistance in order to ensnare her. Christmas looks at his own body, "seeming to watch it turning slow and lascivious in a whispering of gutter filth like a drowned corpse in a thick still black pool of more than water" (107). This moment of disgusted detachment from his own body coincides with his memory of McEachern's Protestantism and his own rejection of women's compassion as he cuts off the last button sewn by a woman on his garment, and resolves to sleep in a stable, wanting to smell horses "because they are not women" (109). Whereas Psyche is tempted toward misplaced compassion for the corpse afloat in the underworld, Christmas rejects any suggestion of feminine compassion. Moreover, his own body seems an underworld carried within him.

Joe's visit to Freedman's town demonstrates his experience of Jefferson's black neighborhood as an underworld, which parallels the impression that his own possible blackness is an underworld carried within him. In the midst of the white neighborhood, "In the wide, empty, shadowbrooded street he looked like a phantom, a spirit, strayed out of its own world, and lost" (114). Then he finds himself in Freedman Town:

As from the bottom of a thick black pit he saw himself enclosed by cabinshapes. . . . About him the cabins were shaped blackly out of blackness by

the faint, sultry glow of kerosene lamps. On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female. He began to run. (114)

Fleeing the female, black underworldly cast of Freedman Town, he sees four people playing cards, "the bare arms of the women glaring smooth and white above the trivial cards. 'That's all I wanted,' he thought. 'That dont seem like a whole lot to ask'" (115). His simultaneous desire and reductive fragmentation of women to white arms and social activity evokes Prufrock's inverted love song; furthermore, before he reached the town he "paused and rolled his trousers gingerly to his knees" (110).<sup>15</sup> Alluding to the "Love Song" as well as the absence of Eros from Joe's enactment of the Psyche myth, Faulkner sketches Joe's trouble with love as a paradigm of modern man.

Joe is nevertheless drawn toward the underworld, manifested most starkly in Joanna's projection of Medusa into Joe's vision. The shadow of her arm and the revolver she holds, "both monstrous, the cocked hammer monstrous, backhooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake," prefigure the powerful image of her decapitated corpse that exemplifies the novel's numerous splits (282).

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<sup>15</sup> Judith L. Sensibar discusses the influences of T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" upon the novel. It provided the obvious framework for Faulkner's poem, "Love Song" and informs Joe Christmas's narcissism, according to the critic.

Joe looks not at Joanna but at her shadow: "He was watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away" (282). The shadow indicates the underworldly level of plot like those that appear in The Portrait of a Lady, when Ralph secures the money for Isabel's descent, and the foreboding clash of shadows projected by Sethe and Beloved in Morrison's novel.

Joanna and Joe preside as if in marital intimacy over their underworld, "in the quiet dusk peopled as though from their loins, by a myriad ghosts of dead sins and delights, looking at one another's still and fading face, weary, spent, and indomitable" (279). While Lena's marriage is always delayed, Joe's alternate yearning for and rejection of marriage lead to his crucifixion, as if that event is proposed by Faulkner as an alternative metaphor for wholeness. A Jefferson citizen expresses Joe's intimacy with darkness and death in terms of blood and marriage:

He dont look any more like a nigger than I do.  
But it must have been the nigger blood in him. It  
looked like he had set himself to get caught like  
a man might set out to get married. (349)

Joe's desire to meet the fate assigned to him by the town is seen as a marriage with death, an alternative to marriage with Joanna.

### **Money and the Descent**

The hero's path through the underworld, armed with the confidence of vision, constitutes the center of classical

epic. By contrast, the genius of the novel as a poetic form may be charted by the ways in which it complicates or distorts that linear epic path in characters' lives. Three alternative paths in relation to the underworld are central to Light in August; an examination of the mythical motif of the coin exchange in each of them illuminates the larger context of the psyche grounding their actions.

Lena's evasion of the underworld descent will turn out to include a revision of both the portrait of a lady and the Southern myth of chivalry. Joe Christmas's resistance to the descent he undertakes, and its mirror opposite, Gail Hightower's resistance to his inevitable emergence from the underworld, prefigure two moments of Sethe's resistance in Beloved, a novel that frames the psyche in its underworld contexts.

Psyche's passage to and from the underworld may be seen in terms of innocence and the imagination. In his study of Faulkner and Morrison, Weinstein states that "Morrison understands, as a woman writer well might--and a black woman writer virtually must--that the most artful sorts of survival start on the other side of innocence" (192). Gordon dramatizes this point when Catherine announces her infidelity and is nearly strangled to death by her husband; on the threshold of death, she devises a musical art in order to save both her life and his. James elaborates the great expense at which the American girl loses her

innocence, yet as Hillman maintains that money possibilizes the imagination, that realm is one from which she may emerge into a wholeness that calls upon her imagination. Thus when Psyche pays Charon to ferry her into the underworld, she is bound to reach the "other side of innocence," from where she may emerge into a wholeness that suggests not simply a reunion with Eros but a new ability to create.

Whereas Joe Christmas exemplifies the American innocence that requires his descent, as will be discussed, Faulkner accelerates to "the other side" with Lena Grove by portraying her at first sight visibly bereft of sexual innocence and, less obviously, grown out of psychological innocence as well. Lena's pregnancy is in fact the source of her artful survival, her dependence upon others.

Associated by Faulkner with a "pagan quality of being able to assume" (as will be discussed), Lena seems far older and wiser than James's innocent American girl. Ellen Douglass finds that Faulkner's women are identified with "the South as a symbol of lost innocence." They exemplify Faulkner's vision of "human innocence sullied, the lost virgin personified" (165-66). (James brings Northern American innocence to Old Europe, while the Southern protagonists fall in their own region as American novels tend toward the inward turn.) Despite her ancient roots, Lena moves in a realm outside the confines of ancient myth as well as those of Southern society. Evoking the Psyche

myth in one moment as she embodies the Psyche urge, Lena illustrates her exemption from the mythical consequence of money in the next.

Though Lena Grove is propelled by the Psyche urge, by which Psyche searches for Eros and makes her descent, Lena's contact with coins marks her departure from Psyche's path, her complete evasion of the underworld descent. Lena's evasion, moreover, coincides with her evasion of the stasis of the portrait of a lady. Whereas Isabel Archer's carefully spent money gains her entrance into the underworld in The Portrait of a Lady, Lena blithely spends her coins and belies the framing stricture of portraiture, creating her own version of the lady.

Lena is an exception among American Psyche figures as well as among the thwarted women in Light in August. In the midst of an economy of bartering, Mrs. Armstid hoards money coin by measly coin, tending hens and selling eggs. Mrs. McEachern also hoards coins, and Miss Atkins attaches so much bitter meaning to a coin that when the child Joe Christmas refuses it, she is outraged.

Lena receives coins from Mrs. Armstid, whose relinquishment of her egg money dramatizes the tension between male and female: the money earned from female birds is banked in a china effigy of a rooster she impatiently smashes in order to release the money. The coins are tainted by the ongoing battle between the husband and the wife,

whose face resembles that of a defeated general; with the coins she passes on to Lena not only the outrage of a defeated woman but of the defeated South. Voicing the outrage she believes Lena should feel in her predicament, having been betrayed by Lucas, Mrs. Armstid turns upon her blameless (in this case) husband: "You men. . . . You durn men" (16). The coins suggest the burden of responsibility for others.

The gift of the coins, which Mrs. Armstid ties into a cloth sack, coincides with Lena's revision of the portrait of a lady. Having provided Lena with a wagon ride, food and shelter, Henry Armstid "watched her eat":

again with the tranquil and hearty decorum of last night's supper, though there was now corrupting it a quality of polite and almost finicking restraint. Then he gave her the knotted cloth sack. (23)

Armstid notes that in her state, it makes no sense not to eat heartily. Yet here, Faulkner comically inverts the relation of corruption to the ideal of the lady. Rather than the lady's alleged distance from corruption, elaborated by Osmond in James's novel, Faulkner portrays the very idea of the lady's manners as the active force corrupting the realm of decorum as well as common sense.

Continuing her journey in possession of the bitter gift of coins, Lena remembers her self-portrait as a lady:

she had had but a cup of coffee and a piece of cornbread: nothing more, though Armstid pressed her. 'I et polite,' she thinks, her hands lying

upon the bundle, knowing the hidden coins, remembering the single cup of coffee, the decorous morsel of strange bread; thinking with a sort of serene pride: 'Like a lady I et. Like a lady travelling. But now I can buy sardines too if I should so wish.' (26)

Though Lena's exemption from the underworld may seem an undeserved luxury, she practices the restraint of Psyche who, as a guest in the palace of Persephone, may eat but a crust of brown bread and must resist luxuriating in a hospitality that would hinder her journey. Lena demonstrates Psyche's singleness of purpose, reunion with Eros, and keeps moving. Her acceptance of charity is not a stasis but a way of moving through the world. As a "lady travelling," Lena belies stasis and moves outside the social frame of portraiture; the "lady" is now on the move toward union.<sup>16</sup>

The memory of her politeness centers around her present, tactile knowledge of money, the coins in her bundle. Yet in Lena's hands, the bitterness passed on with the coins is dissipated. Like the tasks of Psyche, untying the knotted bundle requires all the patience Lena (unlike Mrs. Armstid) devotes to the procedure when she stands at the grocery counter to make her purchase. Unlike Psyche, however, Lena's exchange of the coins does not gain her passage to the underworld. In contrast to the hoarding women, Lena spends the money, even overspends--the sardines

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<sup>16</sup> The macabre effect of the lady ideal locked in stasis is suggested by Faulkner's story "A Rose for Emily."



cost three times what she expected--to luxuriate in the simple pleasure of food:<sup>17</sup>

She eats slowly, steadily, sucking the rich sardine oil from her fingers with slow and complete relish. Then she stops, not abruptly, yet with utter completeness . . . as if she were listening to something very far away or so near as to be inside her. . . . hearing and feeling the implacable and immemorial earth. . . . The wagon crests the final hill and they see smoke. (29)

Significantly, the depiction of Lena's "utter completeness" coincides with evidence of Joe Christmas; the smoke that marks the time and place of Joanna Burden's death rises into Lena's purview, emphasizing the dependence of Lena's serenity upon Joe's tortured existence, as if she enjoys her privilege at his expense. Yet Lena's luxury lies not in the charity that she gracefully accepts but in the transformation wrought by her exchange of bitterness for joy. Moreover, Lena's "utter completeness" equates her body with the earth, and encompasses both the quickening of life and the distant smoke of death.

Lena's exchange of the coins for sardines marks her departure from the journey of Psyche, whose coins are taken from her mouth by Charon, who recalls Psyche to the materiality of her own body and ferries her into the

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<sup>17</sup> Incidentally, Lena's attitude seems a model of the feminist, postmodern stance proposed by Minrose Gwin, who requires "readers who are willing to remain in the feminine economy of excessiveness, who are willing to *spend*" in order that they may "converse with the feminine" in Faulkner's work (33).

underworld. The fish, symbolically Christian, suggest the richness of the redemptive economy while her sensual enjoyment of the sardines emphasizes the body's inclusion in the soul's salvation. Her own fingers in her mouth, Lena is complete without the initiation of Charon.

The Western Christian perspective, Hillman argues, impedes one's grasp of the underworld as a psychological realm because it claims that Christ descended into hell to release souls from making their own descent. In contrast to salvation through Christ's descent, Hillman adds, Tertullian maintains that the "sole key to unlock Paradise is your own life's blood" (qtd. by Hillman, Dream 217). Yet it is the very dynamic between these two different paths of redemption that Faulkner dramatizes through the separate plots of Lena Grove and Joe Christmas, for Lena's evasion seems a gift while Joe is destined to experience his own crucifixion.

Donald M. Kartiganer perceives that Lena's wholeness is a gift, whereas Joe's must be earned:

Opposed to the wholeness Lena represents is Christmas, whose own wholeness is not a given, like grace, but a struggle with divisions he is all too aware of. The chaos that Christmas must engage is the chaos that Lena cannot even see. She possesses by faith what Joe can have only through the Faulknerian route, that is to say, through the tragic route of defining an individual in history. Joe ends whole because crucified; crucified because he has dared to create his wholeness. Lena is born into a condition that Joe has had to prove. In more ways than one she inherits her 'family' at the end because he has lived and died for it (33).

Within the framework of the novel's double plot, Joe's descent releases Lena from the underworld, as if he descends for her sake. Parallels between Christ and Joe Christmas are alternately noted and dismissed by critics; in the framework of Psyche's myth, the relevant allusion is Christ's harrowing of hell to save souls from damnation. One's descent for the sake of another is prefigured by the Greek Alcestis, who offers to replace her husband in Hades. Similarly, Gordon portrays the interdependent psyches of husband and wife as well as a black woman's dependence upon the emotional suffering of a white woman, inverting the Southern myth of blacks suffering for the salvation of whites. Only a metaphysical interdependence among psyches could account for Joe's ability to suffer the underworld for Lena's sake. Moreover, such interdependence need not be intentional, Faulkner and Gordon show.

Lena's exemption from descent as well as her appropriation of the title "lady" are aspects of Faulkner's dual depiction of chivalry. Deborah Clarke maintains that both Lena and Joanna Burden are "passive recipients of southern chivalry" that "operates . . . as an attempt to re-establish patriarchal order. Yet Faulkner demonstrates its failure to do so" (101). By calling attention to chivalry throughout his works, however, Faulkner invites a closer look. Lena has already dissipated the tension between male and female by accepting and spending Mrs. Armstid's money as

she does. Likewise, she compels a re-examination of the acceptance of chivalry, the practice of courtesy particularly toward women that stems from the medieval tradition of knighthood's service to the lady.

Lena's fictional art makes her receipt of chivalry more than passive. By subverting it, Faulkner also reveals one level on which it works. Lena repeats that she "wouldn't be beholden" to those, from Henry Armstid to the furniture dealer, who take care of her; yet the acceptance of charity is clearly her mode of survival.<sup>18</sup>

Lena represents a different economy from the one that dooms psyches to descent. In the absence of Lucas, she inspires men to take responsibility for her, men who seem to pay for a collective guilt by kindness to her.<sup>19</sup> On the level of the novel form, she is certainly indebted to Joe Christmas, whose unwitting participation in the deepest example of chivalry includes descending to the underworld

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<sup>18</sup> Wittenberg writes that "Lena's depiction, however subversive it may be in some ways, seems calculated to disclose the emptiness of routinized language, its inadequacy in the face of that reality it seeks to convert into words" (157). In disclosing the emptiness of words, however, Faulkner allows for a more grounded meaning to fulfill it.

<sup>19</sup> In Cleanth Brooks's classic reading of the novel, there is a larger community that transcends individual concerns. "Lena embodies the principle upon which any human community is founded. She is the carrier of life, and has to be protected and nurtured if there is to be any community at all" (68).

for Lena's sake. Yet as Lena belies the social definition of a lady (the dealer qualifies her claim to that term when he calls her "a lady with a Saturday night family" (502)) she also belies the sense of debt that pervades the economy of Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower. Accepting kindness as well as the gift of exemption, she is not even "beholden" to Joe Christmas.

Joanna Burden, on the other hand, is the "posthumous recipient" of "Southern chivalric lynch law" (Clarke 100). Parallel to Lena's comic subversion is the tragic enactment of the chivalry myth that Faulkner ironizes by extending it beyond the life of Joanna and the fatal injuring of Joe Christmas. As Joe is indicted for the rape and murder of Burden, she is avenged by Percy Grimm's perversion of chivalry that culminates in shooting and castrating Christmas with the exclamation, "Now you'll let white women alone, even in hell" (464). Typical of Faulkner's multivalent work, even the most heinous speech in the novel cannot be simply dismissed, for within the horror of Grimm's violent act and speech lies the conviction of the body's union with the soul after death. Thus, Faulkner goes beyond the Greek understanding of the psyche to the Christian understanding of the body's resurrection after death.

In contrast to Lena, Joanna Burden--burdened by debt--suffers like Joe Christmas. When she leaves her house in Jefferson, from where she assisted black people in person

and in writing, her homesickness for the "sheer boards and nails of the place, the trees and shrubs," suggests that she sees her work as a willing crucifixion. Raised to believe that the black race is the necessary burden of the white race, and haunted with a vision of white babies crucified by black shadows, she is not exempt from the experience of race, "least of all, you" her father tells her, as if the association of women with sin increases the debt she will spend her life trying to pay.

The contrast between Lena Grove and Joanna Burden suggests that division and death result from the oppressive awareness of debt, which deepens the grooves of division between debtors and debtees, male and female, black and white. Yet as Lena has dissipated the old tension of the Armstids, she also dissipates the perversions of chivalry, contrasting the deadly, passive acceptance into a manner of accepting a gift without being over-burdened or beholden; the lady travelling knows the beginning and the end of debt (in stark contrast to *Beloved*, as will be shown in the next chapter) and draws others into her momentum. Lena illustrates her exemption from descent by undermining the stasis of the portrait of a lady, redefining her as a lady travelling, and exchanging the burdens and bitterness for the taste of redemption.

Employing the counterpoint to Lena's exemption from descent, Faulkner depicts Joe Christmas's resistance to the

underworld descent. Joe Christmas's innocence is reflected in his ignorance of death and hatred. When Joanna discusses the history of vengeance in the town and the killing of her family members, Joe's pointed question indicates his naivete about the significance of the dead as well as hatred that extends beyond the bounds of life: "They might have done that? dug them up after they were already killed, dead? Just when do men that have different blood in them stop hating one another?" (249). Weinstein writes that Joe reflects the Southern theory of segregation that exemplifies innocence as a means of keeping blackness and whiteness, male and female, salvation and damnation, separate and pure. Thus when Christmas makes his descent, he brings the theory of a region with him, for in the myth of Psyche, innocence is what requires the passage into the underworld.

Central to Joe's "innocence" is his insistence upon purchased immunity from the fecund bodies of women, as described to him and his friends by an adolescent boy (who seems to experience perhaps something of the novelist's difficulty in portraying the psyche of a woman): "If he had tried to describe it as a mental state, something which he only believed, they would not have listened. But he drew a picture, physical, actual. . . . the smooth and superior shape in which volition dwelled doomed to be at stated and inescapable intervals victims of periodic filth" (185). A distorted "portrait of a lady," the image represents a

dubious attempt at physical realism that stems from the challenge of conveying a convincing picture of a woman's psyche.

Joe's reaction to the picture is an attempt to protect himself and his experience of love from being "sullied," to use a term prominent in Morrison's Beloved. Slaying a sheep, examining its innards, and covering his hands with its blood ritualizes his resistance by rational analysis. Rather than immersing himself in the reality of the body and blood in a kind of initiation, he uses the animal's blood to "wash his hands" of contact with the matter of physical life, to free himself from the consequences of the body, from birth to death: *"All right. It is so, then. But not to me. Not in my life and my love"* (186). This cleansing ritual he believes is "the price paid for immunity. . . . With the slain sheep he had bought immunity" (187). Of course he has purchased only a temporary forgetting and the illusion of innocence. Moreover, Joe's ritual parodies the Christian significance of being "washed in the blood of the lamb," for despite his attempt to gain a kind of salvation without underworldly suffering, Christmas is bound to enact his own crucifixion.

The cleansing ritual emphasizes the Manichean nature of Joe's consciousness, that extends the divisions between male and female through light and dark, spiritual and physical. As Gail Mortimer writes, for Joe, "the female (of which Lena is the quintessence) connotes blackness or darkness and its



dangers, the body (physical self), fecundity." In his view, "the evils of the flesh are intrinsic to women" (17,23). His response to darkness and the feminine is exemplified in the series of violent kicks he delivers to the black girl he is expected to lie with and in the decapitation of Joanna Burden.

For Christmas, women and darkness are also associated with money; in fact, he conflates the three in his wandering: "he bedded with the women and paid them when he had the money, and when he did not have it he bedded with them anyway and told them that he was a negro" (224). His revelation of blackness (an exchange with money) is meant to provoke horror in the white women (and he is consequently beaten on these occasions, which fits into his understanding of exchange); but when one day it doesn't work, when the distinction between black and white is broken down by a woman who could not care less, Joe is the horrified one. The revelation of a white woman's accepted intimacy with a black man sickens him for two years.

Joe's complicated contact with coins suggests that to his mind, the underworld is equated with the horrors of the physical body, especially as embodied in women. Furthermore, his disgust with his own body takes the form of fear of his own possible possession of "black blood" which he correlates to menstrual blood as the "sullied" aspect of embodied life. When he tells Bobbie his own blood secret in return for

knowledge of her body, he believes he is making an even exchange, telling "what he knew to tell": "I think I got some nigger blood in me." Yet her dismissive reaction demonstrates that, like most other women in the novel, she does not subscribe to Joe's economy.

In contrast to Lena Grove's gift economy, Joe's economy depends upon a perfect balance between crime and punishment, a balance that does not take into account unpredictability, either of generosity, mercy, or excess.<sup>20</sup> This is exemplified from the time he was a child. Once he has sneaked into Miss Atkins' room, eaten her toothpaste and vomited in her closet, he expects punishment; when she extends her fist toward him, he expects to be struck. Yet what the fist contains is hush money to keep the child from revealing that he was privy to the dietitian's love affair:

It never occurred to her that he believed that he was the one who had been taken in sin and was being tortured with punishment deferred and that he was putting himself in her way in order to get it over with, get his whipping and strike the balance and write it off. (123)

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<sup>20</sup> Like The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Joe expects that crime will correlate with punishment, striking a predictable balance. Yet "Jesus thown everything off balance" laments The Misfit, who cannot make his punishments fit with his crimes. Jesus's crucifixion upset the balance with mercy, just as women, to Joe's mind, upset the balance by giving too much. It is interesting to note that Joe's rejection of the economy made possible by the crucifixion leads him to enact it himself, as if, like The Misfit, he longs for the knowledge of first-hand experience: "If I'd a been there, I woulda known."

The silver dollar connotes sin arising from association with women: "Looking at the dollar, he seemed to see ranked tubes of toothpaste like corded wood, endless and terrifying; his whole being coiled in a rich and passionate revulsion" (125). Refusing this coin, he soon enters the economy of Simon McEachern, paying "the promissory note which he had signed with a tube of toothpaste" (143).

McEachern's punishments, meted with passionless precision, "ruthless, cold, but not unkind," solidify Joe's economy of predictable balance between crime and punishment (150).<sup>21</sup> As Joe recalls, "he and the man could always count upon one another, depend upon one another . . . it was the woman alone who was unpredictable" (159). Mrs. McEachern's interference "must give it an odor, an attenuation, an aftertaste" (167). The senses of the body are equated with evil: "It was the woman who, with a woman's affinity and instinct for secrecy, for casting a faint taint of evil about the most trivial and innocent actions. . . . she had hidden a small hoard of money in a tin can. . . . meagre and infrequent and terrific nickels and dimes . . . putting into

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<sup>21</sup> McEachern's distortion of a Christian economy is apparent when he rebukes the boy for putting the word of God on "the stable floor, the stamping place of beasts" (149), and of course, the birthplace of Christ, denying the Incarnation in the denial of the body. His comment also indicates an aversion to the groundedness of the earth and the embodied nature of Christ, a denial of the unity between body and soul, the denial that the journey of Psyche attempts to overturn.

the can beneath the round grave eyes coins whose value he did not even recognize" (168).

When Joe tries to give the cash to Bobbie--whom he met over a matter of nickels and dimes--as a gift in marriage (Joe's futile gesture toward the wholeness promised in marriage), she rejects it. Rather than rid himself of the money, he gains even more when Mame, the "gatekeeper" of the bordello, stuffs a bill into his pocket (221). Mame's impulse of pity thus undermines his desire for debtlessness, his wish to "strike the balance and write it off." Whereas Lena spends her coins, Joe accrues more money, as if doomed to passage into the underworld; from Mame's house, he enters "a street which was to run for fifteen years," a course of events full of underworldly allusion (223). As in the Psyche myth, money brings one to the reality of the body's death.

Thus, despite his own economy and his resistance to blackness and femininity, his acquisition of coins emphasizes that he must enter the underworld, must come to terms with what is black, what is female, in other words, what is "darkness." Whereas Lena freely spends the money she acquires, marking her exemption from the underworld descent, Joe seems always to acquire more money, as if doomed to pay his way into the underworld. In his road "doomed with motion," Joe is aligned with Lena's journey of soul; Joe's illusion of debtlessness, however, associates him with Gail Hightower (226).

Gail Hightower believes that his isolation from humanity has been purchased. For his rumored associations with a black woman, he was tied to a tree and beaten unconscious by members of the Ku Klux Klan (72). Hightower's experience gives him insight into the inevitable reaction of the town in Joe's plot once it is suggested that he has "black blood," yet he believes that once he has suffered like a black man--to his mind, the acutest kind of suffering--he will be allowed to live in Jefferson in peace, in his world "peopled principally by the dead," with the leisure to contemplate the pseudo-triumphant moment in Civil War, family history that brought him to Jefferson in the first place (485). Moreover, the town people joke that the initials D.D. after Hightower's name means "Done Damned. . . in Jefferson anyway" (61). Hightower's own conviction reflects the town's view:

And after all, I have paid. I have bought my ghost, even though I did pay for it with my life. . . . It is any man's privilege to destroy himself, so long as he does not injure anyone else, so long as he lives to and of himself-- (490)

Hightower's belief that he has paid his way into the underworld coincides with his illusion of individuality that goes against the grain of the Psyche myth. Byron's aim to make Hightower emerge is eventually accomplished by involving him in the birth of Lena's child and the death of Joe Christmas; his myth of separateness breaks down when he

accepts responsibility for the lives of others. Moreover, Byron reminds Hightower that "payment" may be removed from the balance between crime and punishment:

I mind how you once said that there is a price for being good the same as for being bad; a cost to pay. . . . Maybe it takes longer to pay for being good than for being bad. And it won't be like you haven't done it before, haven't already paid a bill like it once before. (390)

Byron, attracted to Lena's economy, understands that suffering does not always correlate to deserved punishment. As there is payment for goodness, there is also the gift of freedom from debt.

Hightower's resistance is reiterated and his impending emergence from the underworld is foreshadowed in relation to news of Joe Christmas. In a scene at a grocery counter that contrasts Lena's easy purchase of sardines, Hightower pays cash for his purchase and in the next moment hears of Joe Christmas's capture in Mottstown (308). Sensible of the cataclysmic effect of the capture and his own possible responsibility, Hightower reacts by insisting upon his "Stamp Paid" status:

it was more like the earth itself were rocking faintly, preparing to move. Then it seemed to move, like something released slowly and without haste, in an augmenting swoop. . . . I wont! I wont! I have bought immunity. I have paid. I have paid. (309)

Overwhelmed and distracted by the news, Hightower mistakenly pays for the groceries a second time, his hand blundering "upon the counter shedding coins. The proprietor stopped two

or three of them as they were about to roll off the counter" (309-10). The proprietor's comment, "You already paid," voices Hightower's own conviction, yet his awkward gesture has foreshadowed the fact that he will "pay" again, this time for emergence from his deathly experience of history.

The motif of debt is elaborated by Morrison in Beloved: Joshua changes his name to Stamp Paid after submitting to his slavemaster's seduction and rejection of his wife. The new name seems chosen in anticipation of release from purgatorial suffering; when his sins are tallied, he expects to be stamped "Paid," having already suffered enough to earn his salvation. Having suffered the ultimate pain, he should not have to suffer again, he reasons. In both Beloved and Light in August, "Stamp Paidness" emerges as an attempt to settle moral debt by payment rendered in suffering. Like McEachern's theory, it is based on a foreseeable balance between crime and punishment, suffering and salvation, which is, of course, the ultimate goal of the journeying soul. Like Joe's ability to suffer for Lena, it is unaccounted for by a psychoanalysis of his life from the primal toothpaste scene to the killing of Joanna Burden. Stamp Paid himself discovers the unfathomable necessity of paying "All he can" (235).

Money signifies passage to or from the underworld not only for individual characters but for the whole town. It

motivates the release of the word that proves fatal to Joe Christmas. The thousand-dollar reward for the capture of Joanna Burden's killer entices Brown/Burch to reveal Christmas's liaison with her, but when that revelation is ineffectual, when Brown fears the reward money slipping from his grasp, he falls back on the accusation more indicting than murder: "'That's right,' he says. 'Go on. Accuse me. Accuse the white man that's trying to help you with what he knows. Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free. Accuse the white and let the nigger run'" (97). The suggestion of darkness, exchanged for money, intensifies the "emotional barbeque" ignited by Burden's death: the plot of Joe Christmas now moves quickly like wildfire (289), putting into play a kind of suffering both individual and communal--as Hightower recognizes, lamenting, "Poor man. Poor mankind"--that connotes the depth of the underworld (98).<sup>22</sup>

Because Joe internalizes Manicheanism, his disgust for the body manifested in his experience of race and gender, he cannot see the positive aspect of his longing for darkness. Joe must earn his wholeness through an underworld descent configured by encounter with what he resists: women and

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<sup>22</sup> The chase after Joe Christmas is attended by the "sniffing dogs and bitchery" (Dream 50) Hillman points out as symbols of Hecate: bloodhounds search for Joe Christmas as Doc Hines, enraged by the "bitchery and abomination" of the women in Joe's life, from his daughter Milly (Joe's mother) to the dietitian, attempts to incite Jefferson against Christmas.



blacks. His simultaneous attractions and repulsions suggest a longing for darkness that remains unassuaged amidst the need of Southern consciousness to make the descent. The Jefferson's particular brand of racism makes it nearly impossible to see the positive side of darkness, its healing and transformative proclivities. Joe's struggle represents a societal resistance to the underworld.

Amidst a world of division, Faulkner can descend to the depths of Joe's journey because he has an image of Lena's light by which to see his way out of the underworld. This light works for the reader as well, and implies that Lena's wholeness includes resemblance to Eros, as she draws Byron into her life, and draws Hightower out of the underworld.

#### **Light in August and the Longing for Darkness**

Joe Christmas's preoccupation with women and blackness, illustrated throughout his contact with coins and his descent, indicates a longing characteristic of American literature in general. One American woman's journey of soul provides an analogue for considering Joe's plot and its implications for American literature. Her journey also helps to clarify Lena's ability to encompass the numerous polarities held in tension throughout the novel and embodied in Joe Christmas, including that of lightness and darkness.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that Light in August was originally titled The Dark House, perhaps an indication of the novel's movement through darkness into lightness. In a related progression, "a text that had begun as a cautionary

China Galland's Longing for Darkness: Tara and the Black Madonna: A Ten-Year Journey describes the arduous spiritual and physical journey that began when, uncomfortable and unsettled by the purity and whiteness of a statue of the Madonna, she longs for a spiritual image that can assume her own sense of darkness and sin, a longing finally assuaged by the icon of the Black Madonna of Poland. Galland describes the paradigm for her associations of the image of black skin with darkness and its spiritual value in relation to whiteness:

To say that one is 'longing for darkness' is to say that one longs for transformation, for a darkness that brings balance, wholeness, integration, insight. (152)

Searching for an image of healing for her aching psyche, Galland found that whiteness left something to be desired: the transformative and redemptive potency in darkness.<sup>24</sup>

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tale about the dangers of racial mixing turned into one of the most powerful indictments ever written of the white South's racial sins," Daniel Singal writes of the novel, citing Regina Fadiman's interpretation of the novel's revisions (185).

<sup>24</sup> Sensitive to the threat of racism, Galland explains: "The association of the word 'darkness' with something negative, with evil, is precisely the problem I am naming. That kind of association is one of the cornerstones of racism. Racism is evil, not darkness. There is a redeeming darkness and this is what I seek" (152).

Thadious Davis's study of the cultural myth of "Negro" seems to indicate a "longing for darkness" throughout Faulkner's career. He writes: "For Faulkner, because he is a white southerner and a sensitive artist, Negro generally suggests the possibility of wholeness, of establishing the missing parts of his world or vision." But it is not simply achieved "because Negro stands as well for the unresolved

Toni Morrison describes what may be seen as a "longing for darkness" in her reading of American fiction. In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, she observes that American novels end in scenes that portray a certain inadequacy in whiteness:

images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable--all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtailed, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say. (59)

Bearing a resemblance to Galland's experience with the whiteness of the Madonna image, Morrison's reading of American fiction betrays an inherent absence implied by whiteness alone. That emptiness or loss, it seems, begets a "longing for darkness" that may be assuaged by the underworld journey of Psyche.

Morrison also emphasizes self-contradiction as a necessary aspect of the self; those comfortable with self-contradiction experience wholeness without a longing for darkness. When applied to Lena's pattern, Morrison's insight renders it more explicitly coherent. Though Lena is associated with light throughout the novel, she portrays the "self-contradictory features of the self" that Morrison

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tensions of southern life," the world divided by the misperceptions of the white mind. Since Faulkner delays the unity longed for amidst his illustration of divisions, as if tantalizing the desire for wholeness with each emphasis on division, "the seeing whole or the fusion of parts lies with the reader outside of the work itself" (4).

attributes to blackness. This connection in turn grants Lena the untroubled wholeness she is famous for, suggesting a reason why she is exempt from enacting a longing for darkness and from the subterranean descent.

The self-contradictory nature of Lena is difficult for readers to grasp; she is compared with numerous types of female figures and seems to portray aspects of all of them. Lena has been established by critics as a primal mother or earth goddess; she is also compared to the paradoxical Virgin Mother.<sup>25</sup> Faulkner seems to find it necessary to evoke ancient times in order to portray a quality that is exceptional to the modern mind:

[I]n August in Mississippi there's a few days somewhere about the middle of the month when suddenly there's a foretaste of fall, it's cool, there's a lambence, a luminous quality to the light, as though it came not from just today but from back in the old classic times. It might have fauns and satyrs and the gods and--from Greece, from Olympus in it somewhere. It lasts just for a day or two, then it's gone, but every year in August that occurs in my country, and that's all that title meant, it was just to me a pleasant evocative title because it reminded me of that time, of a luminosity older than our Christian civilization. (qtd. in Millgate, 133)

Discussing that luminosity, Andre Bleikasten associates the Greek roots of Lena's "inwardlight" with Helen, claiming

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<sup>25</sup> Virginia Hlavsa writes of Lena: "Called a 'lady travelling,' she appears in August, the time of Caesar Augustus and the Assumption of the Virgin; she wears Mary's color, blue; and she carries the palm-leaf fan" (63). Andre Bleikasten writes that "once Lena has found her meek Joseph in Byron Bunch, there will be another holy family on the road" (277).

that Lena is "denied as desiring body and dissociated from the 'act of darkness' which would jeopardize her mythic purity" (282). In his view, Lena is held aloft and separate from darkness to preserve a purity associated with her likeness to mythical women. Yet the critic concludes with an image of Lena's lightness forming a thin veneer over a reality of the female body described in terms almost grotesque: "Take off the fair mask of light, and all that is left is the stark enigma of spawning flesh" (285). Though Bleikasten points out the necessary darkness attendant upon Lena, suggested by the name Grove, he overlooks Lena's ability to assume both darkness and lightness. The mythical Psyche dramatizes the very encounter of purity with darkness; Lena evokes Psyche's ability to encompass both upper and lower realms. Psyche's myth offers a perspective from which the "stark enigma of spawning flesh," the mortal female body, is elevated to new heights.

Faulkner continues his explanation of light and of Lena:

[Lena] had something of that pagan quality of being able to assume everything, that's--the desire for that child, she was never ashamed of that child, whether it had any father or not, she was simply going to follow the conventional laws of the time in which she was and find its father. But as far as she was concerned, she didn't especially need any father for it, any more than the women that--on whom Jupiter begot children were anxious for a home and a father. It was enough to have had the child. And that was all that meant, just that luminous lambent quality of an older light than ours. (133)

Lena seems more like Helen's mother Leda, ravished by the swan yet remarkably free of outrage. "Being able to assume everything," she represents an acquiescence to motherhood unfraught by the anxiousness often attributed to one in her predicament. Her name also alludes to Magdalene, the already-sullied saint. As Lena assumes the darkness of Lucas's betrayal into her forgiving lightness, the child she carries emphasizes the hope characteristic of a comic plot.

Preceding Bleikasten's mistaken conclusion, his discussion of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the poem which informs Light in August and Faulkner's other novels, demonstrates the essential interdependence of lightness and darkness.<sup>26</sup> Noting the significant Apollo/Dionysus antithesis portrayed in the poem, the critic explains that the Apollonian serenity of the vase depends upon its Dionysian counterpart, "for from the Dionysian depths comes the dark, as yet unshaped and uncontrolled matter from which all Apollonian works of art, be they urns, odes, or novels, ultimately proceed" (281). As the antithesis of Apollo and Dionysus corresponds to the double plot of Lena and Joe

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<sup>26</sup> The first half of the poem deals with the Apollonian spirit of Greek art, the "still unravished bride of quietness" associated by Faulkner with Lena; the second half is Dionysian, evoking "the dark god of music, dance and madness" in the lines, "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?" (281).

Christmas, Bleikasten's discussion would suggest the utter dependence of Lena's serenity upon an underlying darkness.

Byron too is baffled by Lena's apparent contradictions: despite his devotion to her, his comprehension remains limited. In his consciousness, Lena Grove reigns for a time as a paradoxical ideal, a perfect Marian figure, both virgin and mother. When he sees her in the throes of childbirth, however, the rational impossibility of that image slowly begins to dawn on him:

when he entered she did not even look at him. . .  
 . She was covered to the chin, yet her upper body  
 was raised upon her arms and her head was bent.  
 Her hair was loose and her eyes looked like two  
 holes and her mouth was bloodless now as the  
 pillow behind her, and as she seemed in that  
 attitude of alarm and surprise to contemplate with  
 a kind of outraged unbelief the shape of her body  
 beneath the covers. (399-400)

Though she is visibly pregnant when he first sees her, he neglects to engage a doctor because he cannot quite believe she is not a virgin: "It was in his mind, galloping in yoked and headlong paradox," the paradox of Lena as virgin and mother, until he hears the cry of the child. That child carries him back to the moment of realization: "*It was like not until Mrs Hines called me and I heard her and saw her face and knew that Byron Bunch meant nothing in this world to her right then, that I found out that she is not a virgin*" (401). In Byron's mind, the paradox of Lena as a virgin mother can no longer be sustained, as his ideal collides with the physical reality of the body. Yet Lena

does sustain one important effect of her Marian nature, just as Joe Christmas sustains the efficacy of Christ's descent.

In his study of *Psyche*, Hillman discusses Carl Jung's suggestion that the Assumption of Mary is an important image for the twentieth-century psyche, an image that represents the union of matter and spirit, mind and body, and even male and female.<sup>27</sup> That Mary is assumed body and soul into heaven signifies that "'even her human body, the thing most prone to gross material corruption' (par. 195) is not only beneath us but also above us . . . matter and spirit can no longer be such polar extremes, because the dogma heralds their union: earth and the feminine body have been elevated to a higher place" (qtd. in *Myth* 216).<sup>28</sup> While Faulkner evokes pagan times to suggest Lena's "quality of being able to assume everything," the twentieth century's articulation of Mary portrays a similar ability to "assume," carrying the body, matter and darkness to spiritual heights.

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<sup>27</sup> Hillman's insights stem from Carl Jung's comments on the 1950 Papal Encyclical of the Assumption of Mary which "elevated the Christian version of the feminine principle to a radically new position." The Assumption elevates the mother image, including all its characteristic associations with earth, matter, darkness, and "the abysmal side of bodily man," Jung maintains (*Myth* 215).

<sup>28</sup> Hillman adds: "The matter-spirit relation and the difficulties of their harmony reflect, from the psychological point of view, prior difficulties in the harmony of those opposites we call mind and body or, even deeper, male and female" (*Myth* 216).



The myth of Psyche too depicts the elevation of the mortal woman to the position of divinity in Psyche's ascent, once she has descended to the underworld, to Mount Olympus. Lena's associations with both Mary and Psyche, then, reflect the "lady travelling," the movement of her journey toward the unification of the numerous, multivalent oppositions and splits throughout the novel, including the division of mind from body represented by Joanna Burden's corpse. Despite the shattering of Byron's ideal of the virgin mother, Lena suggests the effect of the Marian Assumption, grounding feminine ideals in the reality of the body while elevating female fecundity. Her balance and wholeness, her untroubled maternity, both pagan and Christian, assumes the darkness of matter, the physicality that Joe rejects, into her light.

In contrast to Lena's serenely carried self-contradiction, Joe Christmas dramatizes the difficulty of unifying the disparities represented by lightness and darkness. He is at first shocked at the suggestion of unity, "that there were white women who would take a man with a black skin. He stayed sick for two years" (225). Despite his initial revulsion and prolonged reaction, he enacts a longing that resembles marital union with darkness: Christmas "lived as man and wife" with "a woman who resembled an ebony carving. At night he would lie in bed beside her, sleepless, beginning to breathe deep and hard . . . trying to breathe into himself the dark odor, the dark

and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being," as if he experiences the dread, characteristic of whiteness according to Morrison, and longs for the transformative darkness experienced by Galland (226). Again for Joe, marriage seems to fall short as a metaphor for wholeness.

The woman described as an "ebony carving" contrasts the white marble relief of Lena sculpted by Faulkner upon the Grecian urn. Without her connection to Christmas, Lena Grove would indeed move "forever without progress" across the urn. As Faulkner contains women in urns, rank and moonlit, foul and cracked in Joe's consciousness, Lena moves on the outside surface while Joe's plot moves inside the urn, encountering the black ash of death, and giving an interior to Lena's journey (189).

Through Joanna, Faulkner magnifies the ardent longing for darkness and its confusion with sin. During her affair with Joe Christmas, in which she enacts "every avatar of a woman in love," she calls Joe "Negro! Negro! Negro!" in the depths of their intimacy. Davis argues that "she uses the term to debase . . . herself" (143) yet the exclamation seems rather to suggest her longing for darkness. Having equated sin and guilt with her association with blacks, Joanna has equated darkness with sin only: during her contorted affair with Joe Christmas, she alludes to

Augustine's resistance to conversion in his Confessions (Not yet, Oh Lord) and tries to end it by enforced piety. Though she sees only the spiritual aspects of the affair, she also seems to illustrate the psychological level as she elaborates a longing for darkness.

In contrast to American novels that Morrison sees ending in images of empty whiteness, Light in August culminates in a multivalent image of blackness. The militant Percy Grimm's shooting and castration of Joe Christmas violently manifests the spoken "word blown from mind to mind" (and significantly disembodied) that Hightower dreaded from the moment he heard that Joe, suspected of killing Joanna Burden, was "part negro." In stark contrast to the spoken word, however, Joe's death is described in an elaborate image:

from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it. . . . serene . . . triumphant. (465)<sup>29</sup>

The possibility of transcendence implied by the image is seriously doubted by many critics. In fact, Snead comments

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<sup>29</sup> Snead reads "They" as inclusive of the people of Jefferson, but as the description of Joe's death seems a strikingly visual image described in language very different from the easy-tongued speech of Faulkner's characters, the deep impression would be limited to eye-witnesses of the event.

that "if we actually follow [Faulkner's] narrator here, who offers a 'serene' and 'triumphant' recollection of a vigilante murder, then we have but murdered Joe Christmas once again" (99). Yet as an image that includes crucifixion, darkness, and ultimately a dramatic ascent, evoking Christ's multivalent journey as well as the journey of Psyche, the death of Joe Christmas clearly belies the capacity of easy speech.

In the closing chapter of the novel, when Lena converses with the furniture dealer, she states that the infant was born in Jefferson and the furniture dealer replies: "'Oh. Where they lynched that nigger. You must have been there then' and she clammed up" (497). The dealer's remark exemplifies Snead's comment that Christmas's "death has made a good yarn for the public" (99). Not so for Lena. In contrast to the furniture dealer, she suggests that Joe's story is unspeakable. Though Lena Grove has demonstrated a certain skill at fiction-making in her treatment of Lucas Burch's promise, she does not tell the story of Joe Christmas, as if to anticipate the enigmatic phrase that Morrison repeats in Beloved: "This is not a story to pass on."<sup>30</sup> If storytelling is a holistic endeavor,

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<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Lena is perfectly capable of deflecting a crisis with a coy remark, as when she halts Byron's attempted rape with the exclamation that Faulkner calls the sanest speech he ever heard: "Why, Mr Bunch. Aint you ashamed. You might have woke the baby, too" (503).

a means of unifying disparities and fragments, Lena's refusal to tell the story reflects the major divisions of the entire novel, as well as the impossibility for Faulkner of telling rather than showing the impact of Joe's story.<sup>31</sup>

Whereas Morrison maintains that the art of the novel is finding "the words to say it" (quoting from A.S. Byatt), Faulkner's novel, as a critique of language, falls short of saying and falls back on imagery and action. The combined effect of Christmas's death in darkness and Lena's paradox, both of which suggest the "self-contradictory features of the self," is that of the Black Madonna discussed by Galland. An icon of Mary found in Poland (there are others), the black image has inspired the devotion of the people. A portrait of a lady, it combines blackness with the Madonna, whose Assumption unites matter and spirit, the depth of the underworld with the eternal life of the soul. In the absence of Eros and the delay of marriage in this novel, meaning is conveyed in image and action rather than spoken word.

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Kreiswirth suggests that Christmas's contradictory being cannot be rendered as narrative. Moreland, in his essay "Faulkner and Modernism," discusses the inability of the reader of Light in August and Faulkner's other works to put the novel's meaning into words. Indeed, Lena never explains but turns to fiction, like the novelist himself, to see what she can see. That conflicts in the novel are indeed irresolvable in rational terms turns the focus toward the imaginative writing of fiction and the way Lena authors the continuation of the Psyche urge.

Behind Joe's flight, he sees that blackness seems to have an answer; in his passive surrender to death, he waits for it to reveal something to him. In his death, he seems finally to resemble Lena's ability to assume. Joe's novel-long confusion is that he cannot reconcile his longing for the transformative power of darkness with social dissociations from blackness, as well as femaleness, that he internalizes. In death, Joe finally *becomes* an image of blackness, an image in fiction that the American imagination longs for. Having dramatized disembodiment, both his own and Joanna's, he finally embodies darkness.

Critics point out that Christmas's "black blood" is only a matter of fiction. Yet as a matter of American fiction, as a culminating image in Light in August, "that black blast" suggests, in Morrison's phrase, "all of the self-contradictory features of the self." In contrast to the American novels discussed by Morrison, Joe's plot ends in an image of blackness. As the most effective image of the work, it suggests the novel's ability to contain the self-contradictions Joe spent his life fleeing from. Thus the wholeness Christmas longed for is finally achieved in darkness. If Joe's life enacts a longing for darkness, in death he projects an image of obtaining his desire, perhaps a positive aspect of what Morrison calls "playing in the dark."

#### **Chapter IV. Toni Morrison's Beloved: Incarnation of the Underworld**

Morrison's version of the Psyche myth, like Faulkner's, emphasizes division in imagery as well as structure, reflecting the continued effect of the modern mind's division from the body. Yet as Morrison divides Psyche's underworld descent, she separates the physical journey from the psychological journey. Though the descent into and emergence from American slavery may be physically accomplished, the psyche's need to descend and emerge lingers long after the crossing into freedom. Morrison's use of the Psyche myth gives depth to the historical slave narrative, as she focuses on the psyche throughout the physical ordeal.

In contrast to Lena Grove's exemption from descent, Sethe endures the journey on two levels. Running from Sweet Home and killing her daughter, Sethe physically evades further torment in slavery. Yet Sethe's attempt at psychological evasion of the underworld, resisting the memory of certain events, compels the underworld to come to her in the form of Beloved, who brings with her the agony of descent. Thus, Morrison's twist on the Psyche myth demonstrates most emphatically the holistic logic of the psyche by which the descent is necessary: inverting the psyche's descent to the underworld, she animates that realm; it takes on flesh and erupts into the upperworld.

Morrison's separation of the descent of the body from the descent of the psyche is noted by Susan Bowers, who states that as a slave narrative traces the pattern of "slavery, escape, and the journey to freedom" (Willis 220), Morrison shows that "the process must be repeated twice: first to leave physical enslavement by whites and the second time to escape the psychological trauma created by their brutality" (215). Yet the paradigm of escape is inadequate for the psyche: the myth shows that trauma must be suffered through rather than escaped from. Bowers's reading focuses upon the Apocalyptic aspects of the novel, yet as Beloved occupies the infernal position in Morrison's trilogy of novels that ends with Paradise, the focus of Beloved is less the soul's future reckoning than a wrestling with the past.

Though Bowers again uses the term "escape," she describes the underworld descent and emergence essential in the novel. The physical escapes of the characters "create the patterns for their psychological escapes: archetypal journeys of courage, descents into almost certain death, and rebirths into beauty and freedom" (215). The critic cites two examples of this pattern: Amy Denver's assistance of Sethe before she crosses into freedom, and the Cherokees' advice that Paul D follow the tree blossoms toward safe territory in the North. This kind of assistance, however, is essential not only for escape, but for emergence from the underworld.



More appropriate to the psyche than mere "escape," Psyche's path of descent and emergence describes the larger action of the novel. For it is precisely Sethe's attempt to "escape psychological trauma" (215), as Bowers phrases it, to resist remembrance of things past, that compels the eruption of *Beloved* into Sethe's determination to forget.<sup>1</sup>

Morrison's paradigm for the complete movement of psyche is exemplified by Paul D, who with his chained companions emerges from the prison box in Alfred, Georgia. "One by one, from Hi Man back on down the line, they dove":

Down through the mud under the bars, blind, groping. Some had sense enough to wrap their heads in their shirts, cover their faces with rags, put on their shoes. Others just plunged, simply ducked down and pushed out, fighting up, reaching for air. Some lost direction and their neighbors, feeling the confused pull of the chain, snatched them around. . . . Great God, they all came up. Like the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chain in their hands, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other. (110)

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<sup>1</sup> The pattern of escape through flight is particular to the African American imagination, but Morrison and Ralph Ellison explore its limitations. Morrison discusses "the folklore of black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. . . . Perhaps it was wishful thinking--escape, death and all that. But suppose it wasn't" ("The Language" 122). She explores the myth in *Song of Solomon*, acknowledging parallels to the Greek myth of Icarus, whose escape was characterized by fatal excessiveness. Ellison's story "Flying Home" depicts a young pilot's individualist attempt to escape the history of his race. Yet in that story the wisdom figure Jefferson suggests: "You have to come by the white folks, too" (168). Any individual's attempt at flight is brought down to earth by an ordeal that requires the assistance of community.

The men dramatize the "sullyng" experience of descent, struggling through the mud, as well as the communal nature of emergence as they are linked by the chain. Like a rebirth, the scene anticipates Sethe's "baptism" by the community of women at the end of the novel.

Though physical enslavement becomes an aspect of history, Paul D's descent and emergence grants him insight into Sethe's lingering need to make the psychological journey. He knows what direction that journey will take, as well as the danger of attempting it alone:

"What about inside?"  
 "I don't go inside."  
 "Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out.'" (46)

Morrison's striking image of the interior journey of psyche illustrates the underworld as a psychological landscape (like Isabel Archer's solitary review of the events of her marriage) as opposed to the physical landscape depicted in Psyche's myth. The danger attending the inward turn, familiar to Paul D, is elaborated by Gordon as the inability or refusal to turn outward again. As Catherine sees in Maria's extended suffering, "you might turn your vision inward, might from then on contemplate only what could be seen in those shadowy depths. . . . You would hear voices faintly and sometimes forget to answer, as a man, in the

midst of an earthquake, standing on the edge of a precipice and gazing down into the earth's bowels, might not hearken to the voice of a companion, calling out to know the extent of the disaster" (184). The singular black woman amidst the white "women on the porch," each of whom are locked in a particular form of stasis, Maria seems, like Sethe, challenged by an earth-shattering sorrow suffered in the wake of slavery. Hightower also felt the earth shake with news of the capture of Joe Christmas, whose assumed race made his lynching inevitable in the town of Jefferson. Yet the force of Morrison's vision of the psyche bends the inward turn outward again. Shaken by cataclysm, it dives into the mud in order to emerge; for the living, the underworld is not a dwelling place, but one of passing through. Nor must the underworld be allowed to dwell with Sethe, Beloved makes clear.

While the descent of Psyche educates those who enact it, Schoolteacher stands for the obverse of education. His constant analysis of Sethe and the other slaves, including measuring their bodies part by part, is recorded in his notebooks in an approach that breaks them down into dehumanizing divisions. At Sweet Home, Sethe overhears him instructing one of his pupils to put Sethe's "human characteristics on the left, her animal ones on the right" (193). The disintegrating effect of the list that splits her in two makes a deep impression on Sethe that lasts

throughout the novel. Though her split back may be healed by the transforming touch of Amy Denver, the image of her severed wholeness leaves her psyche a gaping wound. In a novel full of physical torment, this list of characteristics illustrates the psychological damage of slavery. It recalls the narrator's comment during Isabel's thoughtful perusal of her marriage to Osmond in The Portrait of a Lady: "For physical suffering, there might have been a remedy" (360).

Whereas Aphrodite challenges Psyche's pretensions to divinity, Schoolteacher compares Sethe to lower forms. As a result, Sethe fears descending to the level of an animal, and begins to resist any association that might come from a lower level, including depths that are necessarily human. One of the main consequences of Sethe's suffering is the effect on her imagination: "her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine" (70). Without imagination, she cannot pass into the underworldly realm of memory. Whereas mythical allusion in The Portrait of a Lady connects money with the possibility to imagine and the ability to enter the underworld, Sethe's overload of the past leaves her bereft of that possibility. Her inability to imagine is reflected in the choice she made when she gathered her children and took them to the shed.

Paul D is familiar with the interior direction of Sethe's journey. His history of dehumanizing suffering,

including being sold, drawing a wagon with a bit in his mouth, and even envying a rooster its indestructible identity, whether live or cooked, grants him insight into Sethe's suffering and her attempt to leap to the other side. As the killing was an attempt to escape from slavery, now Sethe attempts to escape from culpability for the death of the baby girl. Paul D challenges her imagination, telling her:

'What you did was wrong, Sethe.'  
 'I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?'  
 'There could have been a way. Some other way.'  
 'What way?'  
 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four,' he said.  
 (165)

Sethe asks a challenging question, and Paul D's reprimand is brutal, as he touches on Sethe's deepest fear; Morrison says of Sethe: "She almost steps over into what she was terrified of being regarded as . . . an animal" ("In the Realm" 252). Yet Paul D's comment affirms Sethe's humanity and wholeness against the lessons of Schoolteacher, who offers a school of suffering without the intention of teaching knowledge.

The ruinous effect of slavery on Sethe's psyche is manifested in terms of two prominent themes in the novel, maternity and purity. Once Schoolteacher shatters Sethe's own sense of purity, she transfers it to her children in a move that stresses her maternal role to a fatal extreme: her desire to protect that purity leads her to kill her daughter.

In light of the Psyche myth, that act suggests Sethe's psychological resistance to the underworld. In an inversion of Charon's initiation of Psyche into the underworld, which severs her attachment to purity, Stamp Paid ferries Sethe into a false sense of debtlessness. This debtlessness is ultimately belied by Beloved, who erupts from the underworld to exact payment from Sethe which would be endless if not for the intervention of the community. The tensions and difficulties surrounding this initiation ultimately reflect the American literary imagination, which Morrison attempts to address in this novel.

### **Enslavement and Maternity**

The goddess Aphrodite embodies maternity as she influences her son Eros and mocks Psyche's presumption to motherhood. She embodies purity as she renews her virginity in the sea. Yet Psyche's descent, engineered by the goddess, is undertaken to redefine maternity and purity in mortal terms. For Aphrodite knows that the greatest beauty must be obtained from the underworld: the kind of beauty that withstands death and decay. Sethe too is challenged by maternity and purity; both myth and novel link maternity and purity to enslavement, as if those ideals are particularly bound up with the vulnerability of women to enslavement.

Sethe's resemblance to Psyche in her commitment to maternity is evident in her marriage to Halle Suggs. Like the early stages of Psyche's and Eros's love, kept secret

from Aphrodite, Sethe's and Halle's love is most often kept in the dark because of his attachment to his mother:

Halle was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim. For years they saw each other in daylight only on Sundays. The rest of the time they spoke or touched or ate only in darkness. Predawn darkness and the afterlight of sunset.  
(25)

Halle nobly sacrifices his afternoons and Saturdays to purchase his mother's freedom, demonstrating his particular honor for maternity, yet as a result, his love for Sethe remains more brotherly than erotic. Moreover, their brother/sister relation is reinforced by Sethe's equally high value for maternity, which seems passed on to her by Halle.

Sethe's escape from Sweet Home separates her from Halle, but extends his honor of maternity: in a moment of crisis, she leaves her husband behind in order to reach her children. Like Psyche and Lena Grove, Sethe travels alone and visibly pregnant, yet while Psyche's and Lena's journeys are impelled by longing for their lost love, Sethe is driven by maternal responsibility, manifested physically by her urgent desire to nurse the baby girl who has been sent ahead. Whereas Psyche is tempted to end her suffering by suicide, Sethe's thoughts of death are surmounted by her maternal role. Even when she despairs of ever reaching freedom and her little girl, she refuses to succumb to the

relief of death because her body would become a grave for the unborn child she carries.

The incidents that make or break both Sethe and Halle center upon maternity. While maternal love urges Sethe to endure the physical journey into freedom, the violation of Sethe's maternity marks Halle's collapse, preventing him from attempting the journey. As Schoolteacher's nephews hold Sethe down and take her milk, Halle witnesses the event from his hiding place in the loft. When Paul D last sees Halle, he is broken: he has covered his face in the contents of a butter churn, "because the milk they took is on his mind," as Sethe knows when she hears the story from Paul D, eighteen years later (70). As milk is the essence of maternal giving, stealing it violates the natural generosity of the mother, that quality that Halle attempts to reciprocate in working to free his mother, sacrificing his role as a husband to that of a son.

Eros, burned and separated from Psyche, returns to his mother for healing, as if still in her power. Indeed, like Halle, he remains under the same roof where his wife suffers mistreatment, as if in tacit agreement with the abuse. Only when Eros escapes from his mother's house is he able to reunite with Psyche and begin a love of both mortal and immortal worth. Halle, however, cannot get maternal love off his mind; he cannot endure the violation of that which he holds sacred, which he has sacrificed for. Having helplessly



witnessed the violation of Sethe's maternity, Halle cannot bear his shame. Halle's excess of love for maternity, moreover, foreshadows Sethe's excessive maternal love.

Schoolteacher epitomizes the psychological distortion of maternal value in slavery. He separates himself from the physical abuse through his analytical role as watcher and recorder; writing in his notebook, he inculcates psychological abuse that haunts Sethe until the end of the novel. When Sethe tells her owner of the theft, the nephews prepare the punishment that splits open Sethe's back. Like Aphrodite, whose mockery of Psyche's pregnancy makes maternity a conscious part of her development, this slave master calls attention to Sethe's pregnancy, instructing his nephews to dig a hole in the earth to protect the child during Sethe's beating. Yet Schoolteacher's protective gesture is a perversion of compassion: his concern is for the property value of the child. Of course, the novel's extension of Schoolteacher's distorted protectiveness occurs when Sethe kills her daughter to protect her from becoming Schoolteacher's property and not her own.

Critics have noted the significance of maternity throughout Morrison's work, particularly in Beloved. Barbara Hill Rigney maintains: "The brutal realities of history are, in this novel, more antagonistic to the psychic realm of the mother than in any other of Morrison's works" (68). Indeed, the particular vulnerability of maternity under slavery

seems obvious to Halle as he sacrifices to free his mother (and plans to free his family). As the emphasis on maternity shifts from son to daughter, Rigney adds: "The disintegration of family, the denial of a mother's right to love her daughter, Morrison reiterates, is perhaps the greatest horror of the black experience under slavery" (68). For when mothers are separated from their daughters, the practical traditions of motherhood cannot be passed on. Thus, Sethe never learned the multiple arts of nourishing her children, and she exaggerates the significance of the mother's milk. In fact, the nickname of the baby girl expresses Sethe's surprise at her daughter's development in Baby Suggs' care: "Crawling already?"

Sethe's own mother passes on distortions of maternity, a legacy of rape and rejection. Through Nan, the slave woman charged with nursing the children, Sethe learns she is the only child her mother did not "throw away"; the others were born of rape by white men. Because Nan nurses both white and black children, she never has enough milk for Sethe, and thus Sethe is bent on having milk for the baby girl and love enough for all of her children. In contrast to the limitations of maternal love in slavery, Sethe celebrates its boundlessness when she reaches free territory: "It felt good. Good and right. I was big . . . and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between" (162). Rigney associates this aspect of Sethe with

the Great Mother of African tradition.<sup>2</sup> She adds that when Schoolteacher's nephews steal Sethe's milk, they "violate the sacred state of motherhood and the African spiritual values which, for Morrison, that state represents" (68). Whatever its origin, Halle affirms a sacred value for maternity in his care for his mother and his vulnerability to Sethe's maternal violation. What breaks him is the dishonor of maternity and, deeper and older, the lost remnant of spiritual value that he cultivated in Sethe.

Erich Neumann's interpretation of the Psyche myth emphasizes that Psyche must differentiate herself from the overwhelming tendency of the Great Mother archetype. Aphrodite tortures Psyche for her pretensions to motherhood, as if the goddess questions the inadequacy of a mere mortal woman. In Sethe's background it seems that the distortions of enslavement have carried a tradition of maternity which is in turn distorted, from the African to the American continent. Sethe has been immersed in a motherhood that is fierce and tyrannical yet inextricably linked with the qualities of protectiveness and nurturing. This complex motherhood she inherits is carried along with her child from slavery into freedom. It becomes manifested when she kills

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<sup>2</sup> Rigney also parallels the strength of Sethe's maternal love to that of the Greek Demeter who "can also reverse history, resurrect that daughter, bring her back from dark water as tall and 'thunderblack and glistening' (261), an image of Africa itself" (69-70).

her daughter in an act that repeats a form of her own mother's act of throwing away the children of rapes, even while that act is an attempt to protect her daughter from that kind of mistreatment under slavery.

### **Purity and the Portrait of a Lady**

As the ideal of maternity calls for redefinition through the descent of psyche, so does purity, which is central to Sethe's motivation in killing her daughter. The incident is documented and brought into the present plot through an eighteen-year-old newspaper clipping, the novel's version of the portrait of lady.

When Stamp Paid shows the portrait to Paul D, he doubtlessly recognizes Sethe "whose head was turned on her neck in the manner he loved so well it watered his eyes to see it" (156). With Paul D's illiteracy, Morrison emphasizes the portrait as opposed to the printed news. He could not read the words, but he knew "there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear" (155). Though the sketch is accurate enough to elicit an emotional response from Paul D, he refuses to associate the woman he knows with the deep horror indicated by the picture. Paul D denies the connection between the woman and the crime again and again: "This ain't her mouth. This ain't it at all. . . . Uh uh. No way. A little semblance round the forehead maybe, but this ain't her mouth" (156-67). Paul D's adamant denial suggests

his participation in the view centered around portraits of ladies in this study: the image of the lady must remain free from associations with darkness.

Harriet Eisman suggests that Psyche is instructed to hold the coins in her mouth to keep it still, because the mouth is one of "the ego's biggest weapons" (39). Psyche's initiation into the underworld breaks down her attachment to purity as well as her pride. Morrison highlights Paul D's protest, "That ain't her mouth," by placing that quotation at the beginning of the chapter and repeating it several times therein. In fact, Paul D's own reaction to the portrait reflects the kind of resistance that the portrait captures in Sethe: she has set her mouth against the figurative invasion of Charon's fingers, against the sully of psyche that a return to slavery, or even its memory, would entail. Moreover, the picture captures Sethe's conviction of the rightness of killing her daughter in order to protect her.

Stamp Paid's picture of Sethe alludes to the germ of the novel, critics often note, a newspaper story Morrison came across while editing The Black Book. In 1851 Margaret Garner, who escaped from slavery with her four children, succeeded in killing one of them when caught as a fugitive. Morrison describes the portrait:

In the inked pictures of her she seemed a very quiet, very serene-looking woman and everyone who interviewed her remarked about her serenity and

tranquility. She said, 'I will not let those children live how I lived.' (Taylor-Guthrie 207)

Though the incident in Beloved is similar, Morrison emphasizes the existence of another world in her rendition of the woman's words: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe," Sethe claims (164). Having suffered physical passage, she seems familiar with the underworld. Yet the tenuous illusions of safety are exemplified in the very house she lives in; though houses are constructed to evoke a feeling of safety, they are also the gathering places of underworldly figures. Sethe explains that her action was:

Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

Though destructive in effect, Sethe's act is a gesture of maternal protectiveness, a gathering of pieces that enacts an urgent desire for wholeness. For Margaret Garner's stated intention was "to end their sufferings, [rather] than have them taken back to slavery and murdered by piecemeal" ("A Visit to the Slave Mother," 10). She would preserve their wholeness with a swift death. Yet this permanent escape into death precludes the temporary passage through death whereby Psyche gains wholeness.

Morrison states that the pieces of Garner's story "fell into place" when she read The Harlem Book of the Dead,

wherein another portrait captures the author's notice:

There was this fashion of photographing beloved, departed people in full dress in coffins . . . . [M]any parents were holding their children beautifully dressed in their arms and they were affectionate photographs taken for affectionate reasons. In one picture, there was a young girl lying in a coffin.<sup>3</sup> ("A Conversation" 207)

The portraits simultaneously express and preserve paternal affection, capturing that love in a permanent image. Yet pictures also portray the loss of the opportunity to express love: in the moment captured, the child is already dead. Moreover, the picture preserves the beloved daughter in a moment of beauty, youth and purity.

Discussing the pictures and a kind of love "peculiar to women," Morrison explains that

in both instances, something seemed clear to me. A woman loved something other than herself so much. She placed all the value of her life in something outside herself. That the woman who killed her children loved her children so much; they were the best part of her and she would not see them sullied. ("A Conversation" 207-08)

Thus what Morrison gleans from the portraits and explores in her novel is how the women's love becomes a refusal to "see them sullied." The women demonstrate a fear of dirtying the best part of themselves that in mythical terms becomes a resistance to Charon's passage into the underworld. Through Sethe, the novelist connects women's love to the

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<sup>3</sup> This girl withholds the name of her lover/murderer, giving him time to escape; she is featured in Morrison's subsequent novel, Jazz.

preservation of purity, the idea that love is enacted by preserving the beloved from being "sullied." (Moreover, Sethe's resistance reflects Paul D's refusal to associate her with the sullied portrait in the newspaper.)

Like Margaret Garner, Sethe believes that her children are "the best part of her." Having suffered Schoolteacher's torment of her psyche, Sethe is convinced that her last preserve of untouched purity is embodied in her children: they are her "best thing," she claims. Sethe's greatest fear is that they, too, might be violated, and it is to preserve her baby girl from violation, particularly the violation of her psyche, that Sethe draws the saw across her daughter's neck. With this gesture Sethe enacts a kind of division characteristic of Schoolteacher's analysis as well as modern thought. It suggests that the loss of wholeness, represented in the mind/body split, is a consequence of the fear of the underworld.

Like the self-sacrificial love Morrison is captivated by in the Black Book portraits, vulnerability to violation seems "peculiar to women." Sethe's neighbor Ella, for instance, uses the unspoken atrocities she endured as a measuring stick for others' suffering. Her violators, a man and his son, remain the superlative of sinister throughout the novel as "the lowest yet." Though violation takes numerous forms, and is suffered by a variety of people, Sethe's fear is concentrated on her daughter. That fear is:



what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp Paid saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing--that part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the colored-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and threw her daughter out of a wagon. She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter.

And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused--and refused still. (251)

Compared to all the instances of physical suffering Sethe has known, Schoolteacher's list is worse; this juxtaposition illustrates the seriousness of the injury to Sethe's psyche.

Though Sethe's refusal is a reaction against analytical divisions of human wholeness, her method of protecting her daughter--drawing the saw across her neck--enacts an image of precisely that problem. Thus, Sethe chose the physical division of mind from body for her daughter rather than the psychological severance suffered under the rule of Schoolteacher. As the culminating instance in a compendium of physical suffering, the two-columned list epitomizes the intensity of psychological pain.

Sethe guards her "best thing" like the maidens of Western tradition who chose death rather than violation; she would choose death rather than have her children, her last vestige of purity, violated. Sethe's jealous guarding of her children reveals a distinct fear of corruption. In contrast to Aphrodite, who restores her virginity with a sea bath, Sethe believes that her "best thing" can be permanently destroyed. Her conviction recalls Madame Merle's lament that Osmond destroyed her soul; while Osmond insists that the soul is an immortal principle, Merle claims hers was good, and he made it bad. Intending to do good for Osmond, she gave up her own daughter. Though it is to a different degree, she freely chose the separation of mother from daughter that African American women often suffered under slavery.

The desire for a cleanness preserved from dirt and death is what requires Psyche figures to make the underworld journey. Like Isabel, Catherine, and Psyche, who attempt to maintain or live up to an ideal of girlish goodness, Sethe attempts to preserve a part of herself that is clean, to remain untouched by the kind of experience that would "dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore."

Together, Garner's story and the Black Book portraits illustrate the life of the child replaced by the preservation of a mother's love--or more simply, active love replaced by a moment of its preservation. Like the parents

in the photograph, Sethe captures her affection for the crawling-already baby girl after the child's death; yet Morrison's version pushes the association of preservation with death to a further extreme. Rather than a portrait of the baby girl, Sethe's affection is preserved in the gravestone carving of the name "Beloved."

Sethe's version of maternal love values purity more than life. The preservation of the daughter's purity is heightened by the fact that Sethe sullies herself by a prostitute's inversion of love in order to preserve the very expression of the love that kept her daughter clean; renaming the child "Beloved," to be engraved on her grave stone, Sethe simultaneously expresses and preserves her affection, like the women in the Black Book portraits. Thus Morrison illustrates that purity can be perfectly protected only at the price of permanent death.

In contrast to Sethe's attachment to purity, critics note the acknowledgement of evil, corruption, and sin that is central to Morrison's vision of humanity. Warner maintains that the novelist "faults the dominant society for its effort to cleanse the world of the wildness of nature and reality of evil--an effort which kills the very soul" (6). The encounter with evil, the acknowledgement of its existence is essential to the life of the soul, which is precisely the reason that Psyche in her girlish goodness

must undertake the underworld journey.<sup>4</sup> Warner explains that the novelist's view of evil is

juxtaposed to what Morrison sees as a Western notion that one must overcome or eschew evil rather than survive it. Morrison contends that the human being cannot live divorced from corruption and the effort to do so is at the heart of human destructiveness, intolerance, compulsion, spiritual death. (7)

While sin and corruption are seen as threats to the soul in Western thought, the absolute denial of evil or the presumed ability to make it disappear invites destruction.

Rigney concurs with Warner in her contention that in Morrison's fiction, a character who typifies health or wholeness, such as Sula in her novel of that title, "is also always corrupt, specifically corrupt because of grounding in and acceptance of a specific human community" (7). Sethe's isolation within 124, where she avoids the threat of corruption, detaches her from the community. Her resistance amounts to a return to innocence that necessitates the descent of her psyche.

Terry Otten writes in the same vein as Warner and Rigney, describing the inability of some characters to

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<sup>4</sup> Hillman writes that the analytical structure of Western consciousness "has never known what to do with the dark, material, passionate part of itself except to cast it off and call it Eve" (*Myth* 8). This rejection is precisely what necessitates the underworld journey that enacts the re-encounter with the "dark, material, passionate part" of the self. The same kind of encounter is enacted in the *felix culpa*, the ultimately fortunate entrance into the experience of sin.

recognize the existence of evil as "the crime of innocence." Noting the recurrent imagery of Adam and Eve's fall from innocence into the experience of sin throughout Morrison's work, Otten contends that a false sense of innocence prevents Morrison's characters from developing a full sense of their humanity, and this is true in Sethe's case (98). He also notes Morrison's use of black inversions of Western Culture: good dressed as evil, evil as good in the ambiguous relation between the two. He writes: "Conventional 'goodness' leads to acquiescence, subservience, accommodation; 'evil' paradoxically may lead to freedom, self-awareness, an authentic self" in the motif of the *felix culpa* (97).

Thus the novel portrays a necessary intimacy with evil, corruption, and sin in terms of Psyche's encounter with the underworld. This is to say that the underworld journey is not a means of becoming corrupt but rather a means of encountering that corruption as a reality, even to the point of becoming intimate with it. Psyche's encounter with darkness culminates when she opens Persephone's box of beauty and applies its contents to her face. Hillman describes her gesture as "the incorporation of destruction into the flesh and skin, embalmed in life . . . anointing the psyche by the killing experience of its personal mortality" (102). Thus, Sethe must learn to incorporate the

underworld and all its suggestions of darkness, death, and her own error, into her life.

Sethe's rejection of the underworldly is elaborated at a moment of insight into the presence of Beloved. The clarity of Beloved's resemblance to her dead daughter does not shock Sethe. Whereas tragic moments of recognition are classically violent, as one comes to terms with deeper knowledge, Sethe's is a moment of calmness, suggesting her rejection of knowledge. Staying up late one night in the house with Denver and Beloved, Sethe experiences "the settling of pieces into places designed and made especially for them":<sup>5</sup>

She simply turned her head and looked at Beloved's profile: the chin, mouth, nose, forehead, copied and exaggerated in the huge shadow the fire threw on the wall behind her. Her hair, which Denver had braided into twenty or thirty plaits, curved toward her shoulders like arms. From where she sat Sethe could not examine it, not the hairline, nor the eyebrows, the lips, nor . . . .(176-77)

The shadow of Beloved resembles Medusa's severed head in all its underworldly frightfulness, even to its paralyzing effect. Sethe remains quiet and stately; she "wiped the white satin coat from the inside of the pan . . . gathered her blanket around her elbows and ascended the lily-white

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<sup>5</sup> This phrase echoes Morrison's moment of recognition when, looking at the Black Book portraits, the pieces of Margaret Garner's story fall into place and Morrison comprehends Garner's motivation. In Sethe's moment of recognition, she is convinced that her daughter has returned to her from the dead, and this justifies her love-inspired decision to kill her, to preserve the best part of her self.

stairs like a bride. Outside, snow solidified itself into graceful forms. The peace of the winter stars seemed permanent" (177). Sethe's peculiar reaction suggests her comfort with the decision she made when she killed her daughter as the imagery of whiteness evokes the purity she deigned to protect. Her reaction emphasizes her sentimental conviction "that what she had done was right because it came from true love," as she later tells Beloved (251). In contrast, Isabel's meditative vigil reveals a conviction of her error as she takes note of the underworld in which she lives.

Wrapped in the conviction of her rightness, Sethe's enclosure in whiteness contrasts the "longing for darkness" evidenced in Faulkner's novel, that desire for the transformative aspect of darkness. Sethe wants everything to remain exactly as it is. Rather than an "assumption" that brings the matter of the world to a higher level, Sethe's ascent evokes the Victorian image of the lady rising above the filth of the world, epitomized in Osmond's expectations for Isabel, to whom he points out the vulgarity of the world in order to keep "oneself unspotted by it . . . to extract from it some recognition of one's own superiority" (360). Sethe's ascent illustrates her denial of her error, of the darkness of her deed; like Paul D in his denial, she rejects the aspects of the underworld that Beloved brings with her,

oblivious to the Medusan projection that evokes Sethe's severance of the baby girl's head.

Sethe's sublime ascent is distinct from the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, associated with Psyche and Lena, who brings with her the depth of matter and earth and all its associations with sin, darkness, and disease as she reaches the heights of heaven. Assumed body and soul, Mary stands for unity amidst the proliferation of separation. Sethe's ascent reiterates her rejection of the psyche's descent to underworld, of her own association with error. By juxtaposing two types of stasis, Osmond's lady and the Medusa, Morrison projects an image of Sethe's rejection of the educative descent to the underworld.

Morrison evokes the medieval lady during Sethe's encounter with Amy Denver, whom Sethe remembers for her "good, good hands." When Denver is born on the river, the women's hands are employed in caring for the newborn; as Morrison writes, "They did their work appropriately and well." After the passage, Sethe's hands are daily employed in the medieval function of the lady as a loaf-kneader in her morning ritual of making bread, yet it seems that Sethe has crossed the River Lethe. Sethe's resistance to her powerful memories inverts the nourishing purpose of kneading: "Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73). Thus, Sethe enacts both the medieval



and Victorian versions of the lady in order to escape the encounter with, and memory of, what is underworldly.

Having transformed Sethe's split back into a chokecherry tree, Amy Denver brings another type of lady into the novel, singing a lullaby passed on to her by her mother (in contrast to Sethe's distorted legacy):

Layeth she her hands upon  
 My dear weary little one  
 And those lily white hands overspread  
 Like a veil the curly head  
 . . .  
 Then she smooths the eyelids down  
 Over those two eyes of brown  
 In such soothing tender wise  
 Cometh Lady Button Eyes. (81)

Lady Button Eyes brings sleep to the child, as if this lady knows the imperative of descent. As sleep is a kind of daily death, she knows the connection between the dream and the underworld. This sleep prepares for the arrival of Beloved, whose face Sethe had seen in a dream. She knew Beloved "the minute she saw the dress and shoes [she is dressed like the children of the Black Book portraits] in the front yard. . . . Didn't even have to see the face burning in the sunlight. She had been dreaming it for years" (132).

Amy leaves Sethe and her newborn on the shore of the Ohio River in a moment marked by the lyric beauty of "spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank" (84). Yet their speech during the encounter prefigures the horror to come on the other side of the river. Imagery of the mind/body split appears throughout the novel, but seems

concentrated in Denver and Beloved's retelling of the story.<sup>6</sup> Amy, the girl who "talked off her head," warns Sethe, "They catch you they cut your head off" (201, 78). Commenting on Sethe's swollen, misshapen feet, Amy tells her, "'I know a woman had her feet cut off they was so swole.' And she made sawing gestures with the blade of her hand across Sethe's ankles. 'Zzz. Zzz. Zzz. Zzz.'" (34). One month later Sethe inverts Amy's gesture when she saws the throat of the baby girl. Furthermore, the restaurant where Sethe finds work after the killing is called "Sawyer's." Beloved's two scars also emphasize that her head was nearly severed from her body: "the little curved smile" that the handsaw left "in the kootchy-kootchy-koo place under her chin," and the "three vertical scratches on her forehead" that Sethe describes to Beloved as "my fingernail prints right there on your forehead for all the world to see. From where I held your head up, out in the shed" (239, 51, 202). The nearly-severed head of the child resembles in certain detail the corpse of Joanna Burden, whose head was nearly detached; by the time her body was carried from the burning house, the severance was complete. Both images suggest a precariousness: that the mind is still attached to the body,

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<sup>6</sup> Sethe and Paul D remember the "headless bride back behind Sweet Home" (13). Denver imagines that her mother "cut off my head every night. . . . After she does it I lie there for a minute with just my head" (206). Separated from her children, Sethe says she "felt like I was split in two" (202).

as it were, by a thin thread, that requires special care, in the case of both Sethe and the man, to keep it from absolute severance. Whereas in Faulkner's story the separation becomes complete, Morrison retains the slight connection, emphasizing Sethe's continuing protectiveness as she holds up the baby's head.

In the arduous escape from slavery, Sethe's encounter with Amy Denver is a hiatus of wholeness and healing. Yet something, it seems, goes awry during the passage ferried by Stamp Paid. Twenty-eight days after the passage, the direction of the story toward survival changes completely when Sethe, a model of physical endurance, recognizes the shape of slavery and chooses death.

#### **Stamp Paid and the Delusion of Debtlessness**

Ferrying runaway slaves across the Ohio River, Stamp Paid brings them from slavery into freedom. Yet once the physical transport is accomplished, the psychological crossing remains incomplete; the novel portrays an enslavement of psyche that continues to plague the physically free.

As Trudier Harris maintains in her essay "Escaping Slavery but Not Its Images," the residual curse of slavery is evident in the monetary language that freed people

continue to use.<sup>7</sup> Harris laments that "although slavery is over, black people are still judging each other through the eyes and with the units of measure of those who enslaved them" (335). Puzzled by Morrison's apparently "mixed message," Harris surmises that the continuation of monetary imagery from slavery into freedom is the author's way of "redirecting the imagery to comment on the distorted family relationships that exist in the novel" (335). Though family relationships certainly do suffer distortion throughout the novel, the continuation of money imagery directs attention to the passage ferried by the man who calls himself Stamp Paid.<sup>8</sup>

Harris insightfully notes that "Stamp Paid" is "a phrase that complements the thematic structure of the

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, Denver views Beloved's desire as "the penny that the held-out palm wanted." Paul D's spontaneous suggestion that Sethe have another child is "Like paying for an afternoon in the coin of life to come," because he really came to Sethe to confess his affair with Beloved. Incidentally, these examples demonstrate that not only Sethe but Denver and Paul D speak in terms of debt to Beloved, suggesting that Beloved's purpose extends beyond Sethe's conscience to that of each person in the novel.

<sup>8</sup> The name Stamp Paid may be read as an imperative, in reference to an ink pad and rubber stamp, as in "Stamp this paid for" or as a declarative, in reference to a postage stamp, as in "This stamp is paid for." Whether either kind of stamping is completed or allowed for, the name holds within it the promise of salvation without further suffering.

novel," yet she claims that by ferrying people across the river and rendering them "Stamp Paid," the ferryman "has reached a level of maturity or self-control in his freedom that other characters . . . have apparently been unable to attain" (332). With the same unqualified approval of Stamp Paid's work, Rigney claims: "All African Americans are, in essence, 'Stamp Paid,' Morrison implies" (41). Yet Harris and Rigney fail to note the delusion of debtlessness indicated by the name Stamp Paid and passed on to his passengers. For, years after slavery has been outlawed and the need for ferrying has ceased, Stamp Paid himself questions the validity of the theory whereby he changed his name.

Having shown Paul D the newspaper portrait of Sethe that causes a great rift between the couple, Stamp Paid is struck by his own thoughtlessness: "Maybe he was not the high-minded Soldier of Christ he thought he was but an ordinary, plain meddler who interrupted something going along just fine for the sake of truth and forewarning, things he set much store by" (170). He plans to visit John and Ella, his former partners in ferrying, as if to reconsider what was accomplished in the well-intentioned transport of people:

Perhaps there he could find out if, after all these years of clarity, he had misnamed himself and there was yet another debt he owed. Born Joshua, he renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master's son. Handed her over in the

sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through? With that gift, he decided that he didn't owe anybody anything. Whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off. He thought it would make him rambunctious, renegade--a drunkard even, the debtlessness, and in a way it did. But there was nothing to do with it. Work well, work poorly. Work a little, work not at all. Make sense, make none. Sleep, wake up; like somebody, dislike others. It didn't seem much of a way to live and it brought him no satisfaction. So he extended his debtlessness to other people by helping them pay out and off whatever they owed in misery. Beaten runaways? He ferried them and rendered them paid for; gave them their own bill of sale, so to speak. 'You paid it; now life owes you.' And the receipt, as it were, was a welcome door that he never had to knock on. (184-85)

Stamp Paid once ferried Sethe across the Ohio, awarding her the theoretical receipt that acknowledged the value of her suffering, yet Sethe's door is closed to Stamp Paid, indicating a flaw in his theory. Like Ralph's well-intentioned gift to Isabel, Stamp Paid's ferrying of fugitives carries with it a certain brutality. Like the shadows Ralph and Mr. Touchett cast upon the ceiling as they discuss the fortune that will doom Isabel to the underworld, shadows of Sethe and Beloved appear in Morrison's novel, forewarning of dangerous encounter: "In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords" (57). In spite of Stamp Paid's good intentions and his great accomplishment of helping others physically escape slavery, he exposes them to psychological harm. By assuring his passengers that they

are thereafter exempt from further payment in suffering, he ferries them into a false state of being, a detachment from the world that resembles a return to innocence. His own sense of debtlessness had left him dissatisfied and restless, one might even say soulless.

Sethe demonstrates her adoption of Stamp Paid's theory when she exclaims, "I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner, it cost too much!" (15). Influenced by Stamp Paid's illusion, Sethe refuses to allow herself or her children to return to the misery of slavery, a decision that ends in death. Over the years, she refuses to return to slavery by way of memory, resisting "rememory" of the painful past, as if she has been ferried across Lethe rather than Acheron.<sup>9</sup> Though she has completed the physical passage into freedom, at a cost higher than estimated even by Stamp Paid, she refuses to make that passage on the psychological level, the passage that for Psyche is begun by Charon.

Critics compare Stamp Paid to Charon, a parallel that merits fuller exploration in conjunction to the Psyche myth.<sup>10</sup> Bowers states that "Beloved's equivalent of Charon"

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<sup>9</sup> Bowers suggests that "Sethe's name may be an allusion to Lethe, the spring of forgetfulness in Greek myth" (214).

<sup>10</sup> Larry Allums states that Stamp Paid is a "reverse image" of Charon, teaching Paul D to endure the hardships of his life (279).

clarifies "that physical escape into physical freedom is only the first step for the slaves" (219,218). Yet while Bowers maintains that Stamp Paid carries his passengers "physically to an underworld," it becomes clear that Stamp Paid inverts Charon's function; rather than initiate Sethe into the underworld, ridding her of her attachment to purity, he assists Sethe's evasion of Psyche's descent (219).

Evocative of the River Acheron, the Ohio River is deadly and monstrous, infested by "the Klan. Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam the Ohio at will" (66). Whereas Charon ferries people into the underworld, Stamp Paid ferries his passengers from the physical underworld of slavery into a realm of physical freedom, yet one that falsely claims the psyche's freedom from descent. Stamp Paid's passengers are led to believe that they don't owe whites anything else, yet the burden of debt haunts them nevertheless, even among the black community. Twenty-eight days after crossing into supposed debtlessness, Sethe pays the life of her daughter for a second escape from slavery.

Contrary to Stamp Paid's theory, Sethe is overcome with debt. As Hester Prynne names her daughter Pearl to signify that she was "dearly bought," Sethe wants "Dearly Beloved," the phrase from the preacher's mouth, engraved on her daughter's headstone. Sethe has the money to pay for the



headstone, but she prostitutes herself to the engraver to pay for the word "Beloved," for her love to be spelled out on the tomb in permanent fashion, like the love of the parents in the Black Book portraits with their children. Despite Sethe's self-sacrifice, the engraved word "Beloved" is but a fragment that falls short of wholeness, and Sethe worries that she owes more. She regrets that "for ten more minutes, half an hour maybe, she could have gotten the whole thing."

Whereas Charon's function is precisely to "sully" or "dirty" Psyche, to rid her of her attachment to her own earthly perfection, Stamp Paid fails to accomplish that initiation. As a result, Sethe is convinced that her misery has ended, that her "best thing," displaced onto her children, is exempt from the encounter with dirt. Stamp Paid's theory is proven false when Schoolteacher crosses the river to reclaim Sethe and her children. Moreover, Sethe's success in protecting her daughter from being sullied is undercut by Beloved's complaints of suffering violation during her passage.

Thus, in the absence of Charon's initiation, Sethe enacts an extreme version of Psyche's sullying experience. Yet rather than a liminal moment on a continuing journey, the occasion of Sethe's sullying is preserved in stone. Like the portraits, the engraving preserves her affection, yet it also preserves her shame.

Like the name Beloved, Halle's mother, Baby Suggs, is dearly bought, with an unstinting devotion to maternal love and five years of Saturdays and afternoons. Upon leaving Sweet Home, however, Halle still owes \$123.70 for her freedom, nearly \$124, an amount suggesting a houseful of inescapable debt (196). "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom," the reader knows from the first lines of the novel; the house on Bluestone Road seethes with the baby ghost's sense of injury, the debt owed her (3). As Denver puts it, "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was trying to make her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that" (251). Since Beloved is unwilling to show mercy (as will be discussed), Sethe's debt is endless. There would never be an end to the desire of a baby girl, killed by her mother, to live. Nor could any payment be made that would make up for all the atrocities of slavery embodied in Beloved. Though Sethe may eventually be forgiven by the community, she can never pay Beloved in full because she cannot give her life.

Thus, Stamp Paid's assurance that Sethe doesn't owe life anything else is contrasted to Beloved's reason for being: to exact endless payment from Sethe. If, as Harris notes, "Stamp Paid" is a phrase that complements the thematic structure of the novel, the name "Beloved" cries out a deficiency. Their names reflecting a mirror-like symmetry held in tension throughout the novel, Beloved's

insatiable desire to be loved belies Stamp Paid's assurance of debtlessness.

**Psychological Passage: The Underworldly Beloved**

As shown, Beloved's desire to exact payment from Sethe belies Stamp Paid's assurance of debtlessness. Having lived for eighteen years "in a house full of touches from the other side," Sethe asks herself, "The worst was over, wasn't it?" (98). Critic Roger Sale answers, "No, because other parts of the past can reach out and clutch like the tentacles of an octopus, because Beloved is there to cast a spell over Sethe" (170). Like the ancient Furies, Beloved is a force to be reckoned with. Thus when Sethe refuses to revisit the ill effects of slavery, the underworld, more powerful than the power of refusal, rises up to enslave her psyche.

The holistic logic of the psyche is on Beloved's side as she forces the underworld upon Sethe, but Beloved never receives the help necessary to emerge fully into the upperworld. Though Morrison animates segments of history and the fictional past in *Beloved*, that character is composed of parts that ultimately fail to make a whole. Morrison's novels, Warner writes, "are journeys during which the heroes become heroes because they are able to cross from the first world to the second" (10). Beloved crosses into the upperworld, taking on the clothes and shoes of the upperworld, doing her best to be human and to be loved by

imitating the living. Her desire to be loved, like Psyche's desire for Eros, is the yearning for wholeness that impels all successful passages. Yet desire alone cannot make her whole; Beloved begins to fall apart, beginning with the loss of a tooth and ending with an almost complete disappearance from the novel. This motif of pieces, appearing throughout the novel, indicates Beloved's unsuccessful passage into the upperworld.

Sethe's killing of her child is based on her knowledge of an other world: having endured the physical passage from a slave state to a free state, and having lived a month in a former way station, she knows of a place where Schoolteacher cannot claim her or her children. Sethe explains that the baby girl "had to be safe and I put her where she would be" (200). Sethe tells Beloved: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you from getting here. Ha ha" (203). To Sethe, Beloved's appearance reverses the intended journey, and Sethe seems proud of her daughter's ability to evade the limitations that trapped Sethe. Yet like the failed passage that Sethe attempts to enact as a whole family, intending to kill two daughters, two sons and herself, Beloved's return is also piecemeal and finally incomplete.

Beloved's incomplete passage to the upperworld reflects the millions of Africans who did not survive the Middle

Passage. Karen Carmean points out that the novel's dedication "to sixty million and more" cites the figure that estimates "the number of Africans rounded up for the slave trade who either died while awaiting transportation or who died during the passage on the slave ships" (82). As Paul D notes upon Beloved's arrival, her shoes were not worn: her passage must have been something other than a walking journey. Beloved describes to Denver that otherworld in terms that echo the slave ships: "'Dark,' said Beloved. 'I'm small in that place. I'm like this here.' She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up." She saw "heaps" of people: "'A lot of people is down there. Some is dead'" (75). Carmean suggests that Beloved is in a way an "actual survivor from a slave ship" (85,86).

Morrison discusses the double function of Beloved's passage from the dead and from Africa to America in the slave ship, referring to other characters' curiosity about the other world from which Beloved comes: "So that when they say, 'What was it like over there?' they may mean--they do mean--'What was it like being dead?' She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. Both things are possible, and there's evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experiences--death and the Middle Passage--is the same" ("In the Realm" 247). The poet Robert Hayden also parallels the two experiences in his poem "Middle Passage,"

describing the journey as the "Voyage through death / To life upon these shores."

The multivalent significance of passage in Beloved offers parallels to the art of fiction. Warner writes that characters who originate in myth are Morrison's "crafted versions of archetypes":

they tap the deeper instincts and living signs which have been subverted. They allow her novels to live in two worlds, to be themselves a crossing.

Beloved, too, is a crossing. . . . This novel ponders the difficulties of a movement from conditions of slavery to what one might call self-possession. (11)

Those "deeper instincts and living signs" insist on being made manifest in spite of subversion, much as Beloved insists on trying to make it wholly into the novel that bears her name, but where she never fully exists. As assistance is imperative to the emergence from the underworld, it is also necessary to the art of the novelist, whose subverted material must be assisted as it emerges into the world of the novel.

Discussing Song of Solomon and Tar Baby, novels that precede Beloved, Warner writes of the juxtaposition between the present culture and "a more ancient, animated world that lives in harmony with its mythology" (10). In Beloved, this land of the imagination is represented by Africa, where the people participate in the antelope dance that seeks and rejuvenates the spirit. Memory of the dance strikes Sethe as

she is about to give birth to Denver, for her pain resembles a little antelope kicking inside her:

Of the place where she was born, she remembered only song and dance. . . . Oh but when they sang. And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. . . . They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet know her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach. (31)

The pain-inspired memory immediately precedes the miraculous appearance of Amy Denver, whose assistance is necessary for Sethe's survival and the birth of Denver. As the baby's movement parallels the dance of the imaginal realm, its images, like the child, need assistance to be brought to birth. This imaginal world is not the underworld; nonetheless it necessitates an ordeal. Novelists tap it as a source; in and of itself, however, it remains insufficient.

Like Eros rescuing Psyche from the underworld of torment and temptation, Morrison speaks of a "lost girl" whose gradual rescue impels the construction of her novels:

. . . bit by bit I had been rescuing her from the grave of time and inattention. Her fingernails maybe in the first book; face and legs, perhaps, the second time. Little by little bringing her back into living life. ("A Conversation" 217)

As Eros rescues Psyche from the land of the dead, the author seems bit by bit, little by little to brush from the girl her Stygian sleep, elevating her to immortality in the imaginations of the readers. It is striking how similarly Caroline Gordon describes writing as a transport between two worlds, even if her emphasis is more general and technical:

"The work already exists in another country like a great statue which you bring over, piece by piece and, with luck, re-assemble on your own terrain" (qtd. in Cowan, Preface vi). For both authors, the endeavor of fiction is a transport that must be undertaken bit by bit, piece by piece. The piecemeal movement from one world to the next is to a certain extent a matter of endurance in Beloved, but like Psyche's emergence from the underworld, it also requires assistance. As the novelists show, the completion of successful passage is the goal of their life work. But some kind of luck or grace is needed to make the pieces fit into a whole story.

Beloved's passage occurs when "a fully dressed woman walked out of the water," as if she has crossed the river boundary between worlds (50). Speaking of her novel, Morrison admits: "I couldn't get Beloved's voice. . . . I just couldn't get there. I wrote around it: She was there, but she couldn't say anything . . . I could get Denver's and Sethe's voices, but I just couldn't get that girl to say where she had been" ("Author Toni Morrison" 242). Before Sethe and Paul D hear Beloved's words, they hear the "low and rough" sound of her voice, a deepness that coincides with Denver's impression of her coldness (52, 53). Elusive of particulars, she makes a deep impression while giving an impression of depth. Yet Morrison's failure to "get"



Beloved's voice parallels Beloved's failure to emerge wholly into the upperworld.

Warner maintains that the mental aspects of passage are central in Morrison's body of work. Her first five novels present "the mental landscape upon which the African in the West must travel. . . . The constant landscape of a world turned upside down by the values of slavery . . . constitutes the problem of each novel" (3). As inversions abound in Beloved, the psychological passage from slavery to freedom also seems to necessitate inversion. The tragic Middle Passage that upturns the world has its comic correspondent in the carnival that Paul D, Sethe and Denver attend, reveling in "the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves" (48). The carnival foreshadows the appearance of Beloved, who enacts her own inversion by bringing the underworld with her into the upperworld. Returning home, Sethe seems struck by the strange force of that inversion:

the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity. . . . She never made the outhouse. . . . She hoped Paul D wouldn't take it upon himself to come looking for her and be obliged to see her squatting in front of her own privy making a mudhole too deep to be witnessed without shame. Just about the time she started wondering if the carnival would accept another freak, it stopped. (51)

Hillman's association of dreams with the underworld suggests that Beloved here initiates Sethe into the underworld, for dreams characterized by (among other things) "an

embarrassing, frustrating search midst others for 'a place to go,' or the discovery that one has soiled oneself . . . can be read as underworld initiations. These are indeed death experiences for the dayworld ego, whose cleanliness is next to its Godlikeness" (Dream 184). As Sethe kills her daughter in an attempt to control the child's fate, to preserve the cleanness which she believes will distinguish her from lower forms, it is precisely the clean or unsullied that Beloved's appearance dramatically overturns.

Moreover, Beloved's allusions to violations suffered during her passage suggest that Sethe, by killing her daughter, failed to protect her from the violation of passage into death. Crowded and transported in the bowels of a ship, at the mercy of the "men without skin," Beloved suffered the type of atrocities that Sethe was compelled to protect her daughter from.

Beloved's identity remains as mysterious as the realm from which she comes. As Denver tells Paul D, at times she thinks Beloved was her sister, and "at times I think she was more" (266). Like the characters in the novel, critics have multiple explanations for her enigmatic origins that extend beyond her likeness to the dead girl.<sup>11</sup> Yet by association

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<sup>11</sup> James Phelan's reflections on the elusive identity of Beloved include a compendium of critics' suggestions: "Beloved is a survivor of the Middle Passage and of a white man found dead in his cabin around the time she shows up at 124 (House). She is both Sethe's murdered daughter and her murdered African mother (Wyatt), a specific character in a

with the underworld, she eludes definition, for "the underworld is a realm of only psyche. . . . The logos of the soul, *psychology*, implies the act of travelling the soul's labyrinth in which we can never go deep enough" (Hillman, Dream 25).

Beloved resembles what the baby girl would look like had she lived, including the scars of her death. Hillman writes that the underworld is

where one's entire mode of being has been desubstantialized, killed of natural life, and yet is in every shape and sense and size the exact replica of natural life. The underworld Ba of Egypt and the underworld psyche of Homeric Greece was the whole person as in life but devoid of life. (Dream 46)

To the characters in the novel, Beloved sometimes seems like a whole person, but in fact she is devoid of life and thus cannot remain in the upperworld. Hillman adds that "being in the underworld means psychic being, being psychological, where soul comes first" (47). Beloved, who is all soul (she is not soulless, but lifeless), "took the best of everything--first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon" (241). At the expense

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specific family and a representative of all the middle passage women (Rigney), 'and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them' (Horvitz 157). She is a figure filled with the psychokinetic energy of the others, who then use that energy to act out their needs and desires (Wilt). She is the incarnation of Sethe's guilt (Rushdy)" (226-27). Bowers suggests: "Among other things, Beloved is the embodiment of . . . the psychological effects of slavery" (219).

of Sethe's body as well as her psyche, Beloved fattens while Sethe grows thinner.

As Sethe's physical passage from slavery into freedom requires the unexpected and unaccounted for gift of Amy Denver, Sethe's psychological passage from enslavement to Beloved to freedom from Beloved also requires such a gift. Sethe's emergence from the underworld brought on by Beloved requires at last the graceful presence of Paul D (as will be discussed).

The gift of Amy Denver and Paul D becomes conspicuous by its absence from Beloved's plot. Having early lost her life, she is bereft of the chance to be loved. As a figure who seems pure psyche, whether individual or collective, Beloved must return to the underworld of which she is the substance. She remains a Psyche without Eros. Not even Morrison's art can bring her completely out of the underworld.

Louise Cowan calls Beloved a "*belle dame sans merci*, a fatal lady without grace" (Classic Texts 295). Like the *belle dame* of Keats's poem, she captivates the imagination of her victims.<sup>12</sup> Seducing Paul D, she enables him to release his pent-up heart from its "tobacco tin" sealed to resist

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<sup>12</sup> This kind of figure appears in Gordon's The Strange Children. A beautiful young woman whose white bathing suit and very wide-brimmed hat liken her to a mushroom which suggests the connection to the dead, she captivates the poet and his imagination only to lead him into permanent darkness.

the loss of love. Beloved offers companionship to the lonely Denver, and creates with her the story of Sethe's journey. But her inspiration is static: she does not lead Denver out of the house and into the world, and she would keep Paul D forever separate from Sethe, preventing both his and her emergence.

With a force opposite the assurance of Stamp Paid, Beloved makes Sethe contemplate the horror of her choice. The moment when Sethe prostitutes herself to the engraver, moreover, is held intact by Beloved, who forces Sethe to abide permanently in that shame by keeping the tombstone name constantly before her. And Beloved resembles the daughter just enough to bring before Sethe the image of the body she killed. As Cowan suggests, "Coming from the underworld, a place not simply of the dead but of those spirits who have ranged themselves on the side of negation, Beloved finds an aperture into the world of light through Sethe's shame. . . . Like all that grows in these inner abysses, this alien spirit has become perversely precious" (295). Thus Beloved ensnares Sethe by appealing to her compassion. The moment of Sethe's shame is like a portrait through which Beloved may enter the world. Like one of the snares set by Aphrodite to keep Psyche in the underworld, Beloved appeals to Sethe's compassion, to her love for her daughter, in order to delay Sethe's emergence into the upperworld.

The epigraph of the novel suggests the connection between Beloved and mercy. Morrison quotes: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." The women of the community and Sethe must claim each other as their own and Sethe must make herself beloved. St. Paul's epistle to the Romans continues: "and her who had not obtained mercy, one who has obtained mercy." The women never call Beloved their own, for she who gives no mercy receives none. Ella calls her "a grown-up evil sitting at the table with a grudge" (256). While others in the novel, particularly Stamp Paid, gradually learn the power of forgiveness, Beloved is fatally bereft of mercy for Sethe.

A scene at the midpoint of the novel suggests that together, Sethe and Paul D have obtained mercy:

Sethe closed her eyes. Paul D looked at the black trees lining the roadside, their defending arms raised against attack. Softly, suddenly, it began to snow, like a present come down from the sky. Sethe opened her eyes to it and said, 'Mercy.' And it seemed to Paul D that it was--a little mercy--something given to them on purpose to mark what they were feeling so they would remember it later on when they needed to. (129)

The trees suggest the defensive power of mercy, even as they recall the tree-like scar on Sethe's back. The scene is enclosed in coin imagery: Paul D's sudden, hopeful suggestion of a new baby, replacing his planned confession of his affair with Beloved, seems to have "bought" him a little more time, "and [he] hoped the price wouldn't wreck

him. Like paying for the afternoon in the coin of life to come." Following the image of mercy, the snow seems to "crash like nickels on stone" (129). For a coin was needed to pay Psyche's way out of the underworld as well as into of it: "like a present," mercy allows Paul D and Sethe to emerge, while Beloved's lack of mercy indicates her permanent residence in the underworld.

### **Sethe and Beloved: Two Women on the Porch**

When Stamp Paid shows Paul D the picture of Sethe, Paul D imitates Sethe's refusal to suffer more, and escapes into isolation and alcohol. Though Stamp Paid's own theory lies at the heart of this refusal, he has experienced a change of heart by the end of the novel and now seems bound to ferry his passengers out of the underworld his theory brought upon them. Stamp Paid discovers that when it comes to love, there is no end to, nor reasonable explanation for, the giving, and he conveys this insight to Paul D:

'Tell me something, Stamp.' Paul D's eyes were rheumy. 'Tell me this one thing. How much is a nigger supposed to take? Tell me. How much?'  
'All he can,' said Stamp Paid. 'All he can.'  
(235)

Thus when Paul D believes he has paid all he can in suffering, both physically and psychologically, Stamp Paid is now the one to convince Paul D to risk further suffering for the sake of loving Sethe; this quality of love is essential for her emergence.

At the novel's end, Beloved and Sethe stand on the porch of 124, like Gordon's women settled onto the *stoa* of Hades. Sethe's psychological emergence from that threshold is highlighted by Beloved's return to the underworld. "Some things are beyond endurance and you need some help," Morrison says, speaking of Sethe in terms applicable to Psyche as well, "So she has some finally from the women and then from Paul D" ("In the Realm" 250). Whereas Aphrodite repeatedly emerges from the sea with purity restored, Sethe is washed with a wave of mortal quality, composed of women's voices. As she stands on the porch with Beloved, she hears the voices of thirty neighbor women come to reckon with Beloved:

For Sethe . . . the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

Of course, Sethe's "baptism" does not restore her to a state of perfect purity, but it restores her to the community from which she was isolated, and isolated herself, for 18 years. Embracing Sethe's past as well as her potential to kill again, they claim her as their own, demonstrating the quality of mercy lacked in Beloved.

Another wash for Sethe, recalling Amy Denver's and Baby Suggs' assistance to Sethe in her passage out of slavery, is



enacted by Paul D. Despite the pervasiveness of fragmentation, through Sethe Paul D enjoys a certain wholeness: "Paul D took to having Sethe on waking, so that later, when he went down the white stairs where she made bread under Beloved's gaze, his head was clear" (64). The deeper wholeness attained by Paul D and Sethe at the end of the novel is reflected in Paul D's recollection of Sixo's words about his beloved: "She gather me. . . . The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (272-73). Forgiving Sethe her crime and returning to her house, Paul D finds her in the room where Baby Suggs surrendered to death:

Her hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow. Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is. There is too much light here in this room. Things look sold. (271)

Her hair Medusan yet "good," in a room darkened by death yet too lighted, Sethe wavers on the threshold between two worlds. Overcome by life, she leans toward death, like Psyche fallen into a Stygian sleep on the edge of the underworld. "I made the ink, Paul D. He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink," Sethe laments, still haunted by the severance of Schoolteacher's notebook, and her own participation in his ill effects. Even at this moment so far removed from her experience of Schoolteacher in space and

time, Sethe aches from the split she suffered when he separated her into two columns.

Like Amy Denver, whose able hands once healed Sethe, Paul D will rub Sethe's feet. In contrast to his response to the newspaper portrait of Sethe, he embraces her wholly, from the odor of her self-neglect to the horror of her past deed, taking on the task of healing both mind and body. Like Baby Suggs after Sethe's physical passage, Paul D will bathe her in sections. Now that Sethe has suffered the underworld come and gone in the figure of Beloved, Paul D will carefully brush away the Stygian sleep, like Eros, after a separation wrought by betrayal, rescuing Psyche from the threshold of the underworld. Sethe asks herself, as she calls attention to pieces that make a whole:

Will he do it in sections? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold? (272)

When Sethe laments that Beloved, her "best thing," has left her, Paul D's assurance, "You your best thing, Sethe," emphasizes Sethe's emergence from an overpowering maternity. As Morrison points out, "she's always thought of herself as a mother, as her role." While an obviously significant role, Sethe's reduction of herself to simply that role is residual of Schoolteacher, who reduces her to maternal productivity. Her "best thing," once a protected, isolated vestige of purity displaced onto her children, is

replaced as her renewed self that participates in love and the community.

Beloved illustrates the unitive nature of storytelling that recalls the way Light in August closes with the furniture dealer and his wife in bed, telling the story of Lena Grove. For Denver, the wholeness of storytelling transforms the pervasive sense of debt into an imaginative participation in Sethe's experience. Though "it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it," Denver loves to retell the story of Sethe's escape and her own birth (77). Together Denver and Beloved practice the art of fiction, recreating the events, conversation, and closeness of Sethe and Amy Denver. In addition, when Paul D returns to 124 and "leaves the image of himself firmly in place on [Sethe's] narrow bed," he prefigures their future not only as lovers but as storytellers, creating a picture of his desire "to put his story next to hers" (270, 273).<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the promise of wholeness in Sethe and Paul D's plot, Beloved's tale "is not a story to pass on" (275). Critics offer multiple interpretations of what it means to "pass on," but more significantly, Beloved's plot

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<sup>13</sup> Moreland's essay, its title derived from this desire of Paul D, extends the participatory function of storytelling to the function of novels themselves in his dual reading of Twain and Morrison.

alone does not comprise a story.<sup>14</sup> "After [the people of the community] made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her" (274). Rather than the wholeness of story, *Beloved* gives the impression, significant yet fragmentary, of a dream. Before her appearance, Sethe saw her face in a dream; once *Beloved* disappears, "they forgot her like a bad dream. . . . an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep" (274-75).

Sethe's successful emergence from the underworld is highlighted by *Beloved*'s failure to remain in the upper world. Last seen on the porch, *Beloved* virtually disappears. Last sighted by a young boy as "a naked woman with fish for hair," she evokes Medusan stasis as she returns to the underworld (267). Thus, she may be found in upperworldly images of stasis:

Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative--looked at too long--shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (275)

For Morrison, portraits capture not only physical or psychological likeness but the precarious attempt to

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<sup>14</sup> Rafael Perez-Torres maintains: "'Pass on' signifies both rejection and acceptance. *Beloved*'s story cannot be repeated, the narrative warns, cannot be allowed to occur again in the world. The repeated warning also means that this is a story that cannot be forgotten, that cannot be rejected or 'passed' on. . . . *Beloved*'s story should neither be forgotten or repeated" (93).

preserve love; this is precisely where Beloved will be found, trying to participate in that love. Her attraction to beloved portraits supports what Ralph, on his own deathbed, tells Isabel that "life is better. For in life there's love. Death is good--but there's no love" (477). Thus the absence of love in death relegates Beloved to the role of parasite upon the love of the living. Even her time among the living was spent trying to satiate her desire to be loved, to make up for the opportunity to be loved that she lost when she lost her life. Though Stamp Paid's assurance of debtlessness is proven false, Beloved's insatiable desire is never satisfied. While Psyche's descent is a journey for the living, a journey *through* the underworld, Beloved's desire would lock Sethe, ensnared by compassion and guilt, into a permanent descent.

Morrison explores the tension between the portrait's ability to capture something of value and the destructive, underworldly attempt to preserve something intact. A portrait does capture characteristics that are beloved in the subject: for Jim Chapman, his wife's moving eyes, for Paul D, the curve of Sethe's neck, for Osmond, his own taste. In contrast, Lena's defining characteristic is her constant motion which propels her outside the frame of a portrait while she bypasses the stasis of the dead.

In Morrison's vision, portraits can preserve a love for the dead, but they also seem to deaden love. An attempt to

preserve affection, a portrait also indicates a stasis deathly to the living psyche. Like anything that is mere image, it needs human participation, perhaps a little luck, to come alive. Though a portrait may protect a lost moment, and its likeness to a living person may elicit an emotional response, it frames the threshold through which the underworld may enter again if welcomed by the human touch.

Morrison suggests that pictures were once the ultimate form of preservation for black Americans. With a background of enforced illiteracy and a history some of which is purposely forgotten and some of which is helplessly lost, a picture holds the weighty responsibility of preservation. Behind Morrison's treatment of portraits, she seems to offer the novel as a more able means of treating the dynamic of what must be recorded, what must be forgotten, and what must be recovered from the forgotten realm.

Though portraits in Beloved are means of preserving the past and passing it on to others, Morrison explores the limitations of that means of remembering and the way the unchecked desire for preservation transmits the effect of stasis. As Stamp Paid passes on the horror of Sethe's crime with the newspaper portrait shown to Paul D, Sethe uses the metaphor of a picture to pass on to Denver her terror, and the method works: the girl is afraid to leave the yard and remains isolated at 124. For Sethe, the indestructible existence of what she fears is contained in a picture:

Some things you forget. Other things you never do . . . . Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. . . . Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm--every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there--you who never was there--if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. (36)

Fantastically, but in keeping with the force of portraiture that emerges throughout this study, Sethe believes that a picture can preserve the active--and in this case torturous--nature of the subject even after the subject has ceased to exist. An aperture through which the past may intrude upon the present, it also evidences the permanence of human experience beyond material things.<sup>15</sup>

When Sethe's danger at Beloved's hands becomes clear to Denver, she must leave the house and place herself at the mercy of the community, both black and white, in order to survive. Putting aside Sethe's paralyzing picture of fear, Denver takes action: walking out of 124 and the yard she had been afraid to leave, she seeks employment at the white

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<sup>15</sup> Rigney maintains that Morrison's pictures are aspects of "the psychic law" that events in history do not repeat themselves but exist "as a place, a dimension, in the collective unconscious" (74).

Bodwins' house. With this act, moreover, Denver begins to define herself against her overpowering mother.

At the Bodwins' house, Denver encounters an image that suggests partial proof of Sethe's fears yet also marks Denver's necessary initiation into the underworldly history of slavery when she sees

on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service. . . . Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words 'At Yo Service.' (255)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Harris equates the figure with the Sambo stereotype, while Flannery O'Connor depicts a similar image in her short story "The Artificial Nigger" to suggest "the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (Fitzgerald 78). She writes that "there is nothing that screams out the tragedy of the South like what my uncle calls 'nigger statuary'" and adds that "it's a terrible symbol of what the South has done to itself" (101, 140). Morrison laments in Playing in the Dark that critics "see no connection between God's grace and Africanist 'othering' in Flannery O'Connor" (14). For O'Connor, and other authors, Morrison argues, black people appear at the service of the white imagination; this figure in Beloved calls attention to that thesis. Morrison's comment on O'Connor's use of the figure in relation to grace seems an underlying question for her which she touches on in Beloved and explores further in Paradise. Baby Suggs tells her people that the only grace they can have is the grace they can imagine. Yet in her most recent novel, she explores the dynamic between the limitations of the human imagination and the gift of grace. In the chapter entitled Grace, she sets up the question: "If ever there came a morning when mercy and simple good fortune took to their heels and fled, grace alone might have to do. But from where would it come and how fast? In that holy hollow between sighting and following through, could grace seep through at all?" (73). In the final chapter, the Reverend



Harris writes that the figure is an image of what whites made of blacks, and particularly of what Beloved has made of Sethe, who becomes a "wide-eyed, gaping servant willing to suffer any humiliation at Beloved's hands" (337). In terms of myth, the figure resembles Psyche, enslaved to Aphrodite, holding coins for Charon in her mouth, awaiting the sullyng passage into the underworld. Moreover, its nearly-severed head resonates with the death of the baby girl, and Joanna Burden as well.

This image makes a deep impression on Denver. In contrast to the illusory innocence that marks Sethe's encounter with Stamp Paid, the gaping-mouthed boy is Charon-like: it stands for Denver's initiation into the sorrows of the world, particularly the aftermath of slavery. Moreover, the appearance of this statue coincides with the reversal of the tendency in the novel to pass on destructive legacies. While Stamp Paid passed on to Sethe his debtlessness which was proven false and Sethe passed on to Denver her fear of the continuation of the atrocities of enslavement centered around Schoolteacher, that tendency comes to an end. On her way home from working for the Bodwins, Denver tells Paul D that Miss Bodwin has been teaching her: "She says I might go

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Misner notes "how thin the human imagination became trying to achieve [happiness]" (306), yet he also becomes an involuntary vessel of the infusion of grace in the novel in Morrison's assurance that despite human limitation, grace does "seep through."

to Oberlin. She's experimenting on me." Though her words resonate with the horror of Paul D's own experience of Schoolteacher, "he didn't say 'Watch out. Watch out. Nothing in the world is more dangerous than a white schoolteacher.'" (266). Significantly, Paul D does not pass on his story of Schoolteacher; he can see beyond his own experiences to the hope of Denver's future.

While the sign "At Yo Service" emphasizes exploitation, the figure appears at the service of Morrison herself: it serves as a metaphor for the significance of Beloved and its place in the American literary imagination. As it is a Psyche figure, the coins in its mouth recall Isabel Archer's money that initiates American innocence into the underworld of Old World Europe. With that figure Morrison seems to suggest an awkward or even forced readiness of the American psyche to experience the underworldly nature of the New World history of American slavery. Serving the function of Charon, Beloved is a novel of initiation for the American literary imagination, for its historically based horrors may work to sully the American psyche. As a novel, in contrast to a portrait, it is life-like, engaging the reader's participation, offering a way of remembering that engages the past yet illustrates the snares of remaining forever. In comparing Morrison's trilogy of novels--Beloved, Jazz and now Paradise--to Dante's Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso, Beloved's correlation with the Inferno suggests that it

appropriately deals with the diabolical events of history  
yet ultimately forges a path toward emergence.

## **Conclusion**

As Psyche emerges from the underworld descent, she brings with her a kind of beauty that outlasts death and decay. As American protagonists emerge from the descent of psyche, that deeper beauty is conveyed through action and gesture in a union of body and soul that recalls the wholeness of psyche as it was understood in Greek myth.

The insight of the Psyche myth in terms of the portrait of a lady was boldly dramatized by Henry James who demonstrated that an adequate portrayal of a lady must include the underworld descent by which her beauty is deepened. The prevailing significance of the portrait of a lady in relation to the myth of Psyche is demonstrated in Morrison's recently-published novel Paradise (1997). In this novel Morrison shows how the beauty of the portrait of the lady inspires the impulse to preserve and protect it from the sullyng experience by which that beauty must be deepened; in fact, the tension between the portrait and the logic of the Psyche myth culminates in a violent and even deadly clash between those who would preserve the portrait and those who enact the sullyng experience of the underworld. Morrison's novel not only encompasses the need for descent but also looks forward to emergence from the underworld and ultimately gestures toward the ascent of

Psyche's journey as she portrays the impact of the myth on an entire town.

The history of the town of Ruby, Oklahoma is inseparable from the American experience of race, rooted in the belief that exclusion and isolation preserve the community from corruption. It begins in Haven, which was founded by migrating, coal-black families who were excluded from a town of light-skinned blacks. Having suffered this unforgettable denial, the residents of Haven deny each other nothing. Yet when later generations, returning from world war, note the dissipation of the Haven's ideals, they found a new town free from the corruption of outsiders. They take with them the memory of exclusion that inspires a commitment to racial purity, and add to it a memory of a portrait of ladies that inspires a similar commitment to purity as it resists the necessary underworld descent.

The new town, Ruby, is sustained financially by twins, Deacon and Steward Morgan; the twins, in turn, are sustained by Morrison's version of the portrait of a lady. In a prosperous town visited in their youth, Deacon recalls, "he and Steward watched nineteen Negro ladies arrange themselves on the steps of the town hall":

They wore summer dresses of material the lightness, the delicacy of which neither of them had ever seen. Most of the dresses were white, but two were lemon yellow and one a salmon color. They wore small, pale hats of beige, dusty rose, powdery blue: hats that called attention to the wide sparkly eyes of the wearers. Their waists

were not much bigger than their necks. Laughing and teasing, they preened for a photographer lifting his head from beneath a black cloth only to hide under it again. Following a successful pose, the ladies broke apart in small groups, bending their tiny waists with rippling laughter, walking arm in arm. . . . Their skin, creamy and luminous in the afternoon sun, took away his breath. A few of the younger ones crossed the street and walked past the rail fence, close, so close, to where he and Steward sat. . . . Deek heard musical voices, low, full of delight and secret information, and in their tow a gust of verberna. . . . Deek's image of the nineteen summertime ladies was unlike the photographer's. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal. (109-10)

The vision has immense impact on the brothers, whose minds are so closely linked that they can communicate to each other without speech; they agree that the town of Ruby must be a place where the beauty of that memory may be protected and allowed to flourish.

Like the nineteen beautiful ladies, Psyche's physical beauty attracts the attention of men; as the myth shows, Psyche must descend to the underworld in order to emerge with a deeper beauty. In contrast, the Morgan twins crystalize the beautiful women in an image, "pastel colored and eternal," that maintains the women's distance from the implications of the underworld, as if to preserve it in prelapsarian perfection. The portrait stands for not only the recognition of beauty but also the resistance to the underworld descent through which that beauty would be deepened.

The town of Ruby fulfills the Morgans' expectations to a certain degree, for it is isolated and peaceful, protecting its citizens from the dangers of the world. As one man recalls,

a sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll on as she liked. . . . And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else.  
(8-9)

Ruby is not only safe, it seems a haven for women's friendship, a place of comfort for the solitary, restless women of the town. Yet it is no haven for the wandering women from without, each of whom suffers a particular ailment of psyche, who take refuge from the world in "The Convent" outside of Ruby.<sup>4</sup> One man's description of The Convent, "where the entrance to hell is wide," recalls Gordon's Swan Quarter, with its porch a stoa to Hades (114).

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<sup>4</sup> Mavis regrets the negligent death of her children, Seneca cuts streets into herself in an effort to map her place in the world, Pallas suffers her lover's and her mother's betrayal, Grace continues a disappointed quest for eternal love.

In contrast to the women on the porch who remain forever on the threshold of the underworld, the convent women are on their way to emergence from their interior underworld journeys. The place seems, after all, more likely to be a threshold of Paradise.

Steward Morgan, however, believes that the convent women are a "flaunting parody" of the nineteen ladies in the portrait, the "degradation" of the formative moment shared and sustained by the twins. The convent women, he believes,

with their mindless giggling, outraged the dulcet tones, the tinkling in the merry and welcoming laughter of the nineteen ladies who, scheduled to live forever in pastel shaded dreams, were now doomed to extinction by this new and obscene breed of female. He could not abide them for *sully*ing his personal history with their streetwalkers' clothes and whores' appetites, mocking and desecrating the vision that carried him and his brother through a war, that imbued their marriages and strengthened their efforts to build a town where the vision could flourish. (279) (emphasis added)

Steward's term "sully" is the very word Sethe used to describe what she would protect her daughter from. Repeating this term, Morrison suggests the deadly nature of Steward's reasoning, for it was this brand of protection that led Sethe to kill her daughter. Steward's protection of the portrait likewise becomes fatal. He would keep the portrait forever intact, resisting the transformative descent.

Thus, the tension between the portrait and the sully experience of the underworld culminates in an attack on The Convent. Led by Deacon and Steward, the men of Ruby arm



themselves, convinced that the harmless, albeit unusual women threaten the way of life in their town. Ruby thus recalls Faulkner's town of Jefferson with its violent faction, led by Percy Grimm, bent on preserving the purity of white women, dead or alive, in a perversion of chivalry that culminates in the death of Joe Christmas. While Morrison inverts the black and white, the effect is similar, and its irony more extreme: the very desire to protect the image of the nineteen ladies becomes distorted and culminates in deadly violence upon living women.

The unspoken yet formative ideas of the town that lead up to this clash are studied by Patricia Cato, a resident of the town. The moment of the nine families' rejection is re-enacted each year by the schoolchildren; beneath this public memory, the blackness upon which their rejection was based becomes a source for the town's unity which, however, is also based on exclusion. Committed to the purity of their blackness, the men of Ruby are expected to marry within those families. From her vantage point as an outsider--her father married a light-skinned woman from outside of Ruby--Patricia sees that the family trees narrow toward incest as the chosen remain isolated in their town.

It seems to Patricia that a bargain had been struck with God; in exchange for their commitment to purity they would be blessed with immortality: no members of the nine families have died within the boundaries of the town since

its founding. The town's bargain for immortality recalls Joe Christmas's blood-ritual attempt to purchase immunity from the sullyng experience of the underworld, the darkness he associates with blacks and women that he would disallow from his own life and his own love. Like Christmas's bought immunity, the bargain is based on a desire to preserve purity, to remain free from the consequences of the body. Patricia concludes that as Ruby is committed to purity, isolation, and immortality, "everything that worries them must come from women" (217). Like the analytical mind, the men associate women with impurity, temptation, and death.

While Patricia discovers Ruby's foundational flaws, she sees in her study a reflection of her own participation in the town's ideal. She had attempted to compensate for her light skin by marrying a man not only for his beauty but for his highly-valued darkness. In addition, she attempted to maintain a lady-like perfection of manner, so as to remain above reproach despite her outsider's status. Her excessive expectations of perfection, however, corrupt her relation to her daughter, who not only inherited her light skin but also seemed "a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not quite being as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like" (203). Patricia now recalls with regret her failure to defend her innocent daughter from prejudiced criticism by the townspeople, knowing that she subtly participated in the condemnation to distance herself from her daughter and

preserve her own image, which had become portrait-like in its carefully maintained perfection.

Through Patricia, Morrison demonstrates that the ruinous effect of the portrait of a lady--or more specifically, Deacon and Steward's memory of it--comes full circle. Though Patricia never discovered the twins' private memory of the nineteen ladies, she had absorbed what the town expected of a woman, a correspondence with the "pastel-colored and eternal" memory that sustains the town. Untouched by the descent of Psyche, the beautiful but superficial image corrodes relationships in the town. As the ladies are "scheduled to live forever in pastel-shaded dreams," the portrait stands for staunch resistance to death. Yet the image is static, its effect nothing less than deadly in contrast to the living myth of Psyche by which one encounters human mortality.

Though the beauty of the portrait inspires the attempt to preserve it from corruption, its effect is ironically corruptive for the town. Patricia's own idea of the lady, formed under the influence of the Morgans' leadership, corrupts her ability to protect her daughter. Her failure is nearly as destructive as Sethe's over-protection. Thus, Morrison demonstrates the difficult balance that centers around the beautiful girl: the urge to protect her that resists the necessary descent. Whereas Sethe over-protects

her daughter from sullyng, Patricia allows her daughter to become submerged in a permanently sullied image.

The vicious circle of the portrait of the nineteen ladies is broken through by an evocation of the myth of Psyche, as if participation in the myth opens the way for the momentum of Psyche's journey to carry the town from division to wholeness. Deacon's encounter with Consolata, the beautiful, virginal woman from *The Convent*, evokes Eros's secret union with Psyche. This union is the source of his transformation, her transformation and, ultimately, the transformation of the entire town.

As Deacon and Consolata come together in complete darkness, Deacon is "darker than the darkness they split" with the headlights of his truck as they drive miles away from Ruby; because of Deacon's blackness, Consolata "had not seen him clearly even once during the whole night" (228-29). Deacon is as dark as Eros is light; even in daylight, Consolata strains to see him clearly. Morrison's emphasis on Deacon's darkness and Consolata's longing for him recalls the longing for darkness in Light in August and Beloved. It suggests that Consolata's love for Deacon enacts a longing for transformation and recalls that the desire to preserve that blackness stems not only from a moment of exclusion but from the knowledge that that blackness has a particular value for the American imagination.

Deacon's secret encounter with Consolata suggests not the ultimate *hieros gamos* of Eros and Psyche on Mount Olympus but the initial union that precedes Psyche's separation from Eros and her descent to the underworld. Adultery is forbidden of the twins not only because it violates marriage but more particularly because it violates their commitment to the portrait and threatens their personal bargain on which the town is maintained. Thus it is through this temporary violation of marriage, but more deeply, the permanent violation of the twins' memory of the portrait, that Deacon is touched by the logic of the myth and is ultimately able to distinguish himself from his twin and sever his allegiance to the portrait. Moreover, this affair subverts yet ultimately strengthens his marriage, which had been imbued with the stasis of the portrait.

Psyche's descent suggests the depths to which the soul of the town and of Deacon as well must travel. The short-lived evocation of Psyche and Eros infuses the town with a living myth as opposed to the foundational image of a deadened portrait.

Once Consolata separates from Deacon and succumbs to years of a darkness that resembles Psyche's descent, she treats the convent women with not only her usual compassion but a love that leads them through a turbulent struggle with their interior "monsters" and toward emergence (303). Consolata's love recalls Lena Grove's efficacious Psyche

urge that draws Hightower out of his underworld and includes Byron in its momentum.

Years after the affair, the tension between the Morgan twins' desire to preserve the portrait and the underworldly aspects of the convent women who unsettle the men reaches a dramatic moment of crisis when the men attack the convent. At the height of this conflict, Steward raises his gun toward Consolata. In this near-death moment, Consolata looks up and exclaims with joy, "You're back." Deacon believes she addresses him; he would be Eros-like, come to rescue Consolata from the threshold of death. Yet what she had seen and addressed was a vision of the woman, long dead, who had adopted her and brought her to The Convent. Heedless of Deacon's "cautioning, preventive gesture," Steward shoots Consolata.

From that moment on, the twins are deeply divided: Steward maintains his allegiance to the portrait while Deacon undergoes a dramatic conversion that includes walking through the town barefoot, implying his new closeness to the earthly and female, to make a confession to the Reverend. What happens to the convent women remains veiled in mystery: in the violent attack, all of them are shot at and at least some of them killed, yet no bodies are found. The women disappear, body and soul, as if assumed into Paradise in a parallel to Psyche's ascent that suggests wholeness amidst the divisions that have infected the town.

Once the crisis has passed, and the Convent women disappear, the transformation of the town gradually unfolds. The ultimate chapter of Paradise is entitled "Save-Marie," the name of a bedridden young girl who dies in Ruby. With her death, the fact of human mortality is visited upon the town that had previously escaped that fate. Furthermore, the girl's Marian name recalls the Assumption, and with it the elevation of the mortal female body, and all its connotations of earth and dirt, into Paradise.

Save-Marie's death also suggests an opening of the modern American mind. As one of the town's pastors, Reverend Misner, is giving a routine funeral sermon, his speech is suddenly infused with a new theme: honor for a girl's suffering and the loving care she received during her short yet full life. And with a rare eloquence, Misner assures his congregation that "although life in life is terminal and life after life is everlasting, He is with us always in life, after it and especially in between, lying in wait for us to know the splendor" (307). Disturbed by his own words, he turns toward the girl as if in apology: "Oh, Save-Marie, your name always sounded like 'Save me.' 'Save me.' Any other messages hiding in your name?" (307). His inspired words "embarrassed him a little" (307); they spring from a source outside the boundaries of his rational mind.

Moreover, Morrison contrasts Save-Marie's funeral speech to that of Sethe's baby girl. From that sermon, Sethe

took the name Beloved and sullied herself purchasing its engraving on a tombstone, opening up an aperture to the underworld through which Beloved made her entrance. Thus the opening to the underworld is replaced by an opening to Paradise in the progression of Morrison's novels; she works through the underworld descent and emphasizes the American woman's emergence, projecting her finally toward the ascent.

Overall, the portrait theme read in light of the Psyche myth seems to frame the American woman on the threshold of the underworld, presenting the question of which way she will turn. Caspar Goodwood clarifies this when he tells Isabel, "You don't know where to turn. Turn straight to *me*" (488). She is last seen in the door frame of Gardencourt from where she made her entrance into the novel; Goodwood later finds that she is on her way back to Rome. Isabel turns back to the underworld from which she has momentarily emerged, as if the American woman at the beginning of the century has further to go, more to endure. Yet after James, the novelists focus upon not only enduring the underworld as Isabel is prepared to do, but also emerging from it.

Portraits remain significant throughout Morrison's trilogy of novels, composed of Beloved, Jazz and Paradise. In the middle novel, Violet and Joe Trace preserve on their mantle a portrait of Dorcas, the young lover Joe killed. Dorcas recalls the Black Book portrait of the girl who let herself die of a gunshot wound to give her lover time to



escape. Yet the other side of Dorcas's estimable self-sacrifice is her desire to preserve the intensity of love in her death; if she had not let herself die, her lover would have been free from the guilt of murder. Unlike Catherine Chapman, who foresees the tragic result of her husband's murderous impulse and convinces him with an active love to spare her life, Dorcas chooses a love preserved in death.

In the portrait on the Trace mantle, Dorcas achieves recognition as she is adored by both her rival and her lover who alternately arise from their marriage bed throughout the night to look at her picture. This recognition seems to honor her sacrifice, and preserve her perfect love. (In contrast to Consolata, whose influence ultimately strengthens Deacon's marriage, Dorcas seems to plague the Trace marriage even after her death.) Reaching fulfillment in a portrait, Dorcas achieves a kind of *kleos*, the Greek sense of fame or eternal recognition in human memory; she seems more effective in the portrait than she was in life.

While Dorcas's Greek achievement is adequately captured in a portrait, that pictorial form is inadequate to the American women in this study who burst forth from that type of frame. It is the distinction of the novel form that, as James maintains, that people in them appear more true to their characters when "they break, with latent extravagance," the mold provided by the novel form. In contrast to a portrait, the novel is capable of portraying

the distinctive action of the American women who move beyond the bounds of expectation, like Lena Grove, with her compelling momentum of a "lady travelling," or like Catherine, with her musical gesture that persuades the modern mind. Even Psyche's initial beauty, which attracts the attention of men, is portrait-like compared to the overwhelming beauty that she brings out of the underworld. Thus it is that American novelists interpret and portray the beauty with which Psyche emerges from the underworld as a beauty of soul conveyed by American women through gesture and movement.

The Portrait of a Lady demonstrates Isabel's distinction from Dorcas. From the threshold of death, Ralph assures Isabel that even though she may be despised by her husband Osmond, by him (Ralph) she has been "adored." This adoration, however, is ultimately unsatisfying to Isabel. Though she stands for a moment in a gilded doorway, portraying Osmond's idea of lady, her money and marriage have initiated her into the underworld. While the descent of Psyche develops a beauty more than skin deep, Dorcas' portrait regresses to the initial attraction of Psyche's physical beauty that precedes the transformative descent. Ralph's adoration of Isabel is finally portrait-like, for it does not include comprehension of her action: for all his compassion for her suffering, Ralph cannot fathom why Isabel would return to her husband. Isabel, however, surpasses his

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expectations: she is determined actively to engage the life she mistakenly chose, which entails a lengthy endurance of the underworld.

Despite the inadequacy of portraits to portray the American woman, and by implication the psyche of America (and the fragmentation that portraits of ladies bring into focus), Morrison demonstrates the abiding urge to create a portrait of a lady; the American woman continues to inspire the attempt to capture her likeness. In one of the final scenes of Paradise, an artist is trying to paint a portrait of a lady. Resonant with Morrison's motherhood theme, the painter is a mother trying to paint a picture of her absent daughter (who has found refuge in The Convent) whom she has betrayed. Though the mother has covered fifteen canvases, she finds that something is always missing from the portraits.

Suddenly, the mother sees her daughter approaching the house with an infant tied to her chest. The daughter enters the house only to reclaim a pair of huaraches from under the bed; she holds them aloft and then disappears. Yet the momentary appearance deeply impresses the painter; in contrast to the fifteen inadequate portraits, the living girl's appearance adds to the painter's impression the significance of maternity and the simple depth of shoes raised in a gesture of discovery, two themes that give the painter a direction by which to revise the portrait. While

motherhood was barely developed in James's and Gordon's versions of the Psyche myth, Faulkner and Morrison emphasize maternity; Morrison finally projects the American woman toward a future that includes earthly depth and embraces maternity. The daughter Psyche bore upon reaching Mount Olympus is named Joy.

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**Vita**

Born in New York, Kristen Sifert was raised in Arizona and educated at Thomas More College in Merrimack, New Hampshire, and the University of Dallas before attending Louisiana State University.

**DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT**

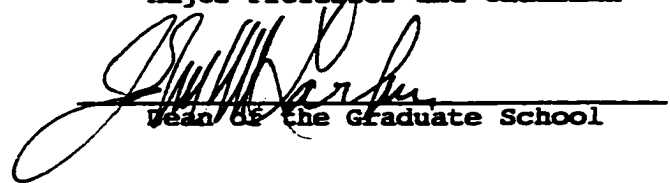
**Candidate:** Kristen Sifert

**Major Field:** English

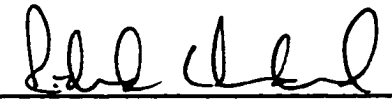
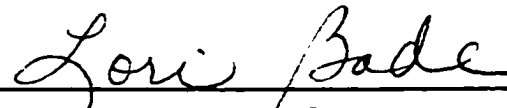
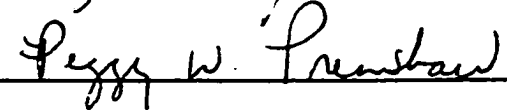
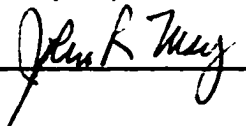
**Title of Dissertation:** The Portrait of a Psyche: Women's Underworld Journeys in  
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Dean of the Graduate School

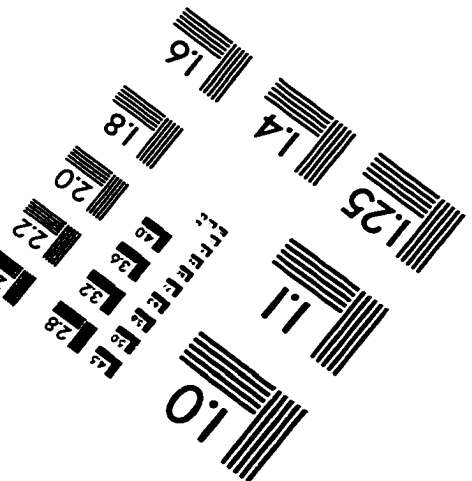
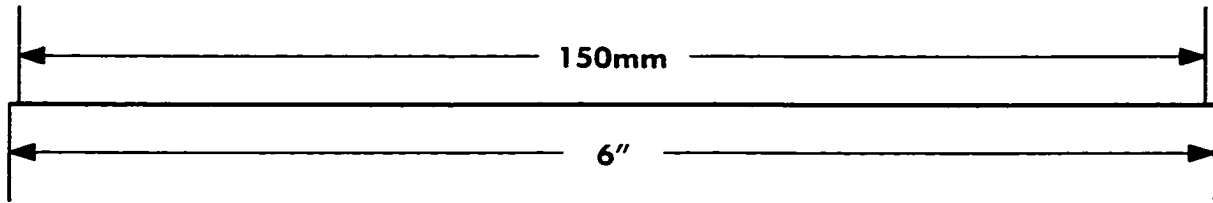
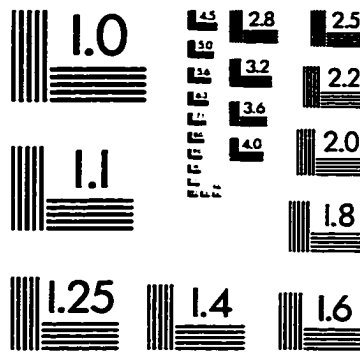
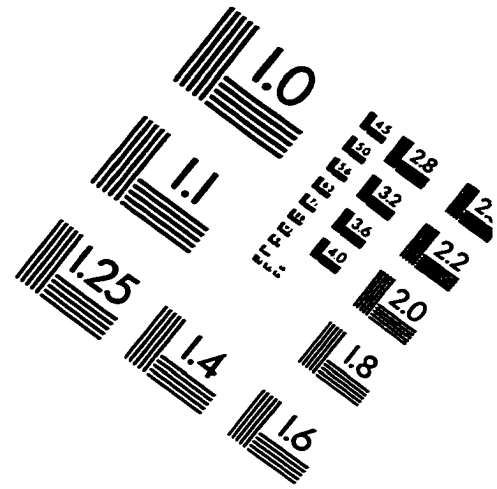
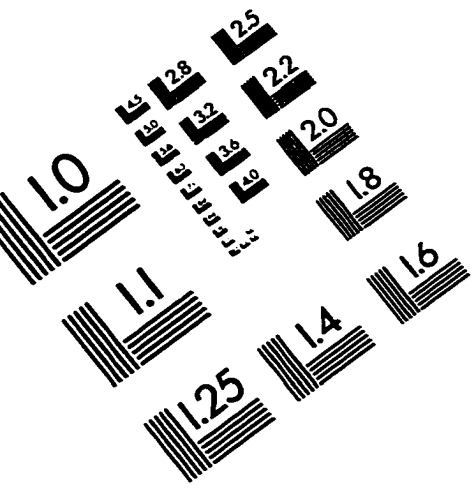
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